Camp Fire Girls Series

The Camp Fire Girls at Lookout Pass

Betty gave one despairing glance at the approaching callers and set off on a run.

The Camp Fire Girls at Lookout Pass

BY

MARGARET LOVE SANDERSON

Author of

Captain Becky's Winter Cruise

Captain Becky's Masquerade

Illustrated by Alice Carsey

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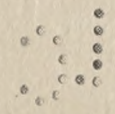

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The Camp Fire Girls at Lookout Pass

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The Camp Fire Girls at Lookout Pass

CHAPTER I

THE INVITATION

"You must go, go, go away from here,
On the other side the world you're overdue!
Send the road is clear before you,
And the old Spring fret comes o'er you,
And the Red Gods call for you!"

The clear high notes, freighted with a longing for the great outdoors of which the singer herself was quite unconscious, emanated from a gayly-striped hammock, hung between two trees, in which reclined a brown-haired girl, her eyes fixed dreamily on the distant hills.

"R-u-th! Ru-u-th!"

The song came to an abrupt end. The girl uncurled her slim length and sprang from the hammock with a suddenness that set it to rocking violently.

"Coming on wings, mother," rang out the fresh young voice.

Clearing the expanse of green, velvety lawn that stretched between her and the fair-haired woman in the doorway of the white house, Ruth Garnier bounded toward her mother with, "It's a letter, I know it is! Give it to me this minute, Mumsie!"

"Which hand will you take?" Mrs. Garnier's arms were folded behind her. She regarded the eager, flushed face of her daughter with a tantalizing smile.

"Both hands, of course," bubbled Ruth. "Oh!" she gave a delighted cry as her mother's right hand, holding two envelopes, was thrust forward. "*Two* letters! One of them is from Betty, and the other is from Emmy. Let's go into the living room and read them. Didn't I tell you this morning I felt it in my bones that I was due to hear from Betty?"

By this time Ruth had firmly linked one arm in that of her mother and was pulling her gently toward the big, cozy living room where the two women were wont to spend long pleasant hours together, reading, sewing or talking of the things that lay nearest their hearts. Ruth adored her

pretty, gentle mother, and the comradeship between them was perfect.

"Sit over there in that big chair, dearest," she now commanded, "while I curl up at your feet and read you the latest news from the girls."

Since the beginning of her vacation Ruth had constantly been hearing from the friends of her schooldays at Miss Belaire's Academy for Girls. There had been seven of them banded together, all Camp Fire Girls, thanks to Ruth's planning, who called themselves the "Seven Savage Maidens."

"Betty's a dear," Ruth chirped as she hastily tore open an envelope addressed in a large flowing hand. "She's the soul of promptness when it comes to letters, even if she doesn't write long ones. Now listen, Mumsie." Unfolding the single sheet of thick white paper she read:

"DEAR RUTH:

"You can never guess what I'm going to write, so I'll set it down as fast as I can. I'm going to give a house-party, or rather a cottage party, for the special purpose of beholding the noble countenances and enjoying the exhilarating society of the 'Seven Savage Maidens,' and, of course, you are respectfully

invited. Father owns a cottage in the Catskills and I have persuaded him to turn it over to me for the summer. I am writing seven letters, exactly alike, with the exception of names. You know six of those names. The seventh name is that of Miss Drexal, who will be our chaperon. Will the 'Seven Savage Maidens' be on the scene a week from next Tuesday? I hope so. And don't bother to bring a lot of fussy clothes. We are to be Camp Fire Girls in the truest sense of the word. Even if we do live in a cottage, we can leave it behind us and camp in the hills whenever we choose. Now get busy and say your fond farewells at home. I shall expect you on the great day, and don't you dare to disappoint me. With much love,

"Yours as ever,

"Betty"

The faint suspicion of a shadow darkened Mrs. Garnier's blue eyes as she listened to the invitation that was to take her daughter from her again so soon after their reunion. She had missed Ruth sorely during the long year she had spent at school.

"Oh, Mumsie, may I go?" Ruth sprang to her feet and slipped two coaxing arms about her mother, wrapping her in a jubilant embrace. Then she added with generous afterthought, "Perhaps

I ought to stay at home with you. If you think so, I'll give up all thought of going."

That settled matters, so far as Mrs. Garnier was concerned. The thought that Ruth was so willing to give up a prospective pleasure for her was ineffably dear. It called for sacrifice on her part.

"Why, yes, I think you may," she smiled, passing a loving hand over the smooth brown head so close to her own. "There's only one 'but,' dear child. Your friend Betty says 'for the summer.' I'd rather you'd come home by the last of August. Then we can have one month together before you go back to Hillside."

"Of course I will," promised Ruth. "I'd never forgive myself if I didn't spend September with you. It's simply splendid in you to say yes the very first thing. I hope all the rest of the girls have such glorious mothers as mine. They can't possibly be *quite* so dear as you, but they will certainly be 'some' mothers if they all say yes."

Mrs. Garnier smiled at this decidedly slangy tribute addressed to the mothers of her daughter's friends. The shadow in her eyes had disappeared. "If you are to leave me so soon, we

shall have to begin preparations at once," she gently reminded.

"Oh, I shall take a steamer trunk and a suitcase, and that's really more than I need in the way of luggage," assured Ruth. "I have two complete Camp Fire suits, and with two white linen skirts, plenty of middy blouses, a walking skirt and one evening gown, I'll have a very extensive wardrobe. I'm not counting the really necessary things, like kimonos and slippers, but I'll manage to squeeze them into that trunk if I have to engage the help of my entire family to sit on it and jam the lid down."

Ruth's buoyant spirits were rising to an enthusiastic pitch as she planned the prospective outing. Already she saw herself in her beloved Camp Fire regalia, tramping over the mountains or idling the summer hours away in company with the girls she adored.

"I'm the luckiest girl in the world!" she exclaimed, hopping about in excitement. "Oh, no, I forgot. There are six others as lucky as I. That is, if all the girls respond to the call. I wonder if— Why, I'm forgetting to read you Emmy's letter!"

Ruth again plumped down on the floor at her

mother's feet and was soon deep in the reading of the long but highly interesting letter from Emmeline Cerrito, her roommate at Miss Belaire's.

It soon became patent to her that Emmy, as her friends delighted to name her, had not yet received the great news. She was at Newport with her father and mother, and although staying at one of the great hotels for which the resort is famous, and surrounded by every luxury, she confessed herself bored and not particularly interested in the gay social whirl of which she formed a part.

"I am tired of hops and society," she wrote. "Being a Camp Fire Girl has spoiled me, I'm afraid. I wish you would make me a visit. I am sure we could think up something more interesting to do than just dressing and dancing and playing golf and tennis. Have you heard from any of the girls lately? They owe me letters, every one of them. Do be a dear, and write me yards and yards. Your letter will be read and reread and cherished. I'll give you a Camp Fire honor bead as a life-saver if I ever get into the high position of bead distributor. Now don't lay this letter aside to answer to-morrow or on some other convenient day. Answer it *now,* and

receive the eternal gratitude of your languishing roommate, EMMY"

"Doesn't she write cleverly?" cried Ruth admiringly. "I just love her letters. Maybe there won't be a surprised Emmy, though, when Betty's letter strikes Newport! I never told you much about Emmy, Mumsie, except that she is beautiful. She has the loveliest soft black hair and white skin and great big dark eyes. She is French and has traveled all over the world. She used to live in Nicaragua, and before she came to Hillside we all thought she would be dark and swarthy, like many of those Central Americans who come to the United States to be educated. We weren't even sure of how much English she knew. You can imagine how surprised we were when we saw her and heard her talk and found that she was really a very distinguished person. She has promised over and over again to make me a visit. May I bring her home with me when the house-party breaks up? That is, if she hasn't made other plans for September."

"I should be glad to have her come home with you," assented Mrs. Garnier. "You know I am always interested in your friends."

"Then that's another cause for happiness,"

exulted Ruth. "When I answer Emmy's letter I shall invite her. She must have received Betty's letter by this time. I won't mention the house-party, though, when I write. I might accidentally spoil Betty's surprise by telling the news ahead of her."

Ruth rose from the floor. With a gay, "Excuse me, dear, I'll see you later," she hurried upstairs to her room to busy herself with the delightful task of accepting Betty's invitation and rescuing the languishing Emmy from the depths of boredom.

Still smiling at the eager enthusiasm of her daughter, Mrs. Garnier turned her attention to her own mail, which had lain neglected, for the moment, on the library table. It consisted of three letters and a magazine. Two of the letters were from distant friends; the handwriting on the third envelope, however, she did not recognize. She scanned it with slightly puzzled eyes, then opened it and extracted its contents. As she read, her face fell into lines of decided consternation.

"Poor Ruth," she murmured, "this *will* be a surprise to her, and not a very pleasant one, I'm afraid."

CHAPTER II

AN ARRIVAL AND A SURPRISE

But while Mrs. Garnier sat staring at the irregular back-handed writing which was to bring her daughter from her height of jubilation with a sudden jolt, Ruth's fountain pen was fairly flying over pages of creamy notepaper in a joyful acceptance of Betty Wyndham's invitation.

Stepping into the hall, Mrs. Garnier paused at the foot of the open stairway and called, "Ruth, Ruth! Come down here!"

The sound of an opening door, followed by a patter of light feet on the stairs, proclaimed the fact that Ruth was hastening to obey the summons.

"What is it, Mumsie?" she queried brightly. Lowering her voice she said almost in a whisper, "Not callers, I hope!" Her alert eyes glimpsed the open letter in her mother's hand. "Nor bad news, either," she added, a trifle anxiously.

"It is your turn to listen to a letter, Ruth," began her mother gravely, "and I am afraid you won't like to hear it. Perhaps you had better

read it yourself." Mrs. Garnier tendered Ruth the disturbing sheet of paper.

There was a brief interval of silence as the girl hastily scanned it.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, throwing the offending bit of paper to the floor with a sudden gust of anger. "It's too dreadful!" The brightness of her face was darkly overcast with clouds of disappointment. Her lips quivered ominously. "I —I—think it is the—meanest thing—I ever—heard of!" she faltered. "All my lovely plans are spoiled. Now I'll have to stay at home and entertain this horrible girl, just because she happens to be my cousin. I won't do it! You must write her, Mumsie, and tell her she'll just have to go somewhere else for the summer. I won't miss my trip to please someone I've never seen and don't care to see! I won't! So there!"

Mrs. Garnier listened in distressed silence to this vehement outburst. She felt that she could hardly blame Ruth for it. The letter which had prompted the storm came from Marian Selby, the daughter of a sister who had died over a year ago. At one time, Mrs. Garnier had invited the orphaned girl to make them a visit; after this long wait, she had accepted. She would arrive on

the following Friday, she stated, on the four o'clock train, and hoped that some one of the family would meet her at the station.

"Please, *please,* Mumsie, won't you write her and tell her to stay out in Missouri where she belongs?" pleaded Ruth desperately.

"But, my dear, how can I? Marian says that she will arrive Friday. That's to-morrow."

Ruth's pretty brown eyes filled with angry tears. "*I* won't go to the train to meet her," was her passionate declaration. "Just from her stiff, back-handed writing I know she must be short, fat, homely, and a regular goody-goody."

"Don't run out to meet calamity," counseled Mrs. Garnier. "Although it is years since last I saw Marian, I remember her as a thin, brown-eyed little girl, very quiet and unobtrusive."

"It is quite evident that she has changed," sneered Ruth. "There is nothing particularly unobtrusive in her calm manner of poking herself in where she isn't wanted. It is ill-bred and inconsiderate, to say the least."

Ruth was well aware that her bitter words were not in accordance with Camp Fire ethics. But, mastered by her anger, she could not refrain from speaking her mind.

"Ruth Garnier, I am astonished!" Her mother's pleasant face grew very stern. "I cannot allow you to speak so sneeringly of your cousin. Remember, she is to be our invited guest and must therefore receive every consideration. I shall not force you to accompany me to the train, but I shall be greatly displeased if you do not. You had better go to your room and think matters over quietly." She made a gesture of dismissal.

Ruth turned away without further words and stamped gloomily up the stairs to her room. The tears which she had bravely winked back now trickled slowly down her smooth cheeks. Closing her door with a bang, she walked to her desk and picked up the letter she had so gleefully begun. Tearing it to bits, she sat down heavily in her desk chair and leaning her head on her arms wept her disappointment.

Unlike her usual cheerful self, Ruth spent the entire afternoon in her room, moping in solitary misery and nursing her grievances. She was still determined not to go to the train. She would treat the girl civilly, but she would never forgive her for coming, and she would soon manage to let her know it.

Obsessed with the desire for sympathy, she poured forth her woes on many sheets of paper, in a new letter to Betty, and when she had sealed the fateful letter and sulkily added an extra stamp by reason of its weight, she felt better. Then she answered Emmy's letter, writing nothing pertaining to the house-party or to Marian's visit. She had said her say to Betty.

When she opened her eyes the next morning to greet the flood of sunshine that poured in at her windows, Ruth forgot for an instant the clouds of the previous day. Dark remembrance choked the snatch of gay song that welled to her lips as she prepared to dress. The fullness of yesterday's disagreeable surprise, that had followed so swiftly on the heels of her joy, returned with new force.

All day she communed sulkily within herself as to whether or not she would accompany her mother to the station. Mrs. Garnier, realizing the depth of Ruth's disappointment, made no effort to discover what was going on behind her daughter's unusually sober face. She had a feeling that when the time came Ruth would not fail her, but until then she wisely decided to hold her peace.

It was precisely half past three when a solemn-faced Ruth appeared in her mother's room, where the latter was putting the finishing touches to her toilet, with the brief utterance, "I'm ready."

"Very well, dear." Mrs. Garnier did not turn from the mirror, before which she stood adjusting her hat. "I am almost ready, too. I told James to bring the car to the door at a quarter to four. That will give us plenty of time to reach the station before Marian's train is due."

Ruth made no answer. Turning slowly, she went downstairs to the veranda, there to await her mother's coming. She was wearing a dainty gown of French organdie and a rose-covered picture hat, and despite her sober air looked the incarnation of sweet, fresh girlhood. But her mind was not on her appearance. She had donned the pretty frock, which ordinarily gave her a thrill of pleasure, with more than one impatient jerk, and had jammed the picture hat upon her brown head with a vehemence that had set the roses on it nodding a mute protest.

Once seated beside her mother in the tonneau of the big gray car, Ruth had nothing to say, and the short distance to the station was covered in almost absolute silence. Several times during the

drive Mrs. Garnier bowed to passing friends and acquaintances, but Ruth stared ahead of her with mutinous lips and unseeing eyes. They alighted from the automobile in the driveway behind the station, and leaving James at the wheel, strolled across the bit of lawn, up the steps and out upon the station platform. It was sparsely peopled, for the town of Burton, in which the Garniers lived, was a quiet little place, and doubly so in summer when many of its residents sought the seashore or the mountains early in the season to remain away until September. As leading banker of Burton, John Garnier's home was among the most attractive in the town, and it was in response to Ruth's fervent declaration that "home is best" that her father and mother had decided to forego their usual summer pilgrimage to the seashore and give their daughter the full benefit of spending her vacation in the home nest.

Ruth had been thinking of this as they bowled along toward the station, and a wave of sudden contrition swept over her as she remembered her mother's unselfish acquiescence to her plea that she be allowed to make one of Betty's house-party. How selfish she had been! Her father and mother had cheerfully given up *their* outing to please her,

and directly afterward she had repaid them by begging to leave them. She felt that she deserved this dreadful hitch in her selfish plan. Now she remorsefully decided to brace up and make the best of things.

As they stepped out upon the station platform, Mrs. Garnier felt a penitent hand slip into hers. "I'm sorry—I—was—so horrid, Mumsie. I'm a selfish girl, but truly I'll try to like Marian, just for your sake."

"Now I have my own dear little girl again," smiled Mrs. Garnier, her affectionate gaze bent on Ruth's earnest face. "I was sure you would see things in a happier light. After all, it may not be so bad. You may find in Marian a friend and companion."

Ruth could not quite bring herself to agree with this. She had formed decided ideas of her cousin.

"I'll see if the train is on time," she volunteered, turning toward the bulletin blackboard that hung on the station wall.

A sharp, shrill whistle diverted her attention, causing her to peer anxiously up the expanse of shining rails. The train was just rounding the curve and bearing down upon them like a huge black monster.

"It's on time!" she exclaimed ruefully. Then with a disconsolate sigh she straightened her sturdy shoulders for what was to come.

The vociferous clanging of bells and creaking of ponderous iron wheels, as the train came to a groaning stop, proclaimed the arrival of the unwelcome guest. Ruth's alert eyes darted up and down the line of coaches in an effort to locate the Marian of her distressed imagination. She had dreamed of her as short, fat and homely, but she could discover no such person. To be sure a very stout, red-faced woman clambered down the steps and waddled toward the station, but *she* had gray hair. Farther up another woman was advancing, marshalling two children ahead of her. Several men with suit cases ran briskly down the steps of the various coaches and went their separate ways. Far up the platform Ruth saw a solitary girl emerging from the train, but she was tall and slender to thinness. As she came forward Ruth noted that she had a pleasant, bright face and walked with an air of self-possession that was almost distinguished.

"I don't think Marian is on this train, Mumsie." Ruth's gaze left the tall stranger, as she turned to her mother with a feeling of relief. She

could not help being just a trifle glad over the nonappearance of her cousin.

"Pardon me, but isn't this Aunt Laura?" A good-humored voice, with a faint drawling accent, caused Ruth to whirl about. Confronting her mother, with outstretched hand, stood the tall girl.

"And is this Marian? My dear, I would never have known you," was Mrs. Garnier's surprised cry.

Ruth regarded the girl with blank amazement. Where, oh where, was the short, fat Marian of her dreams? Suddenly her astonishment deepened. Could she believe the evidence of her own eyes? On her cousin's long, slender wrist was a token that she could not mistake. It was a bracelet, and it stood for but one thing. The unbelievable had come to pass. The despised Cousin Marian was a Camp Fire Girl!

CHAPTER III

OFF TO THE CATSKILLS

"Girls, are you sure you haven't forgotten anything? Think hard. This is your last chance. The car will be at the door directly." Mrs. Garnier surveyed two luggage-laden young women who were descending the broad stairway, an anxious pucker appearing between her usually placid brows.

"Of course we've forgotten something, Mumsie," was Ruth's calm assurance. "It's very likely to be something really important, too. And you may be sure we shan't remember it until we are miles away from here. Did you ever hear of two girls starting on a journey with every single thing they planned to take with them? Why, when I came home from Hillside I found, after my trunk had gone, that I had packed every last shoe I owned, except a pair of tennis shoes I happened to be wearing. So I had to wear them home, and I felt too foolish for words." Ruth giggled at the recollection.

"I'm a prize forgetter, too," drawled Marian

Selby. "The morning I started for Burton I laid my handbag in the tray of my trunk and calmly locked it in. I hunted high and low for it, and never remembered where it was until my trunk had gone. I had to go to the baggage room at the station to get it, and maybe the baggage master wasn't cross!"

"After these confessions I can safely prophecy that in about three days from now I shall receive frantic appeals from both of you regarding numerous valuables you have left behind," smiled Mrs. Garnier.

A little more than a week had elapsed since Ruth and her mother had driven to the station to meet Marian Selby. In that brief space of time a number of things had happened. Following her astounding discovery that the dreaded guest was a Camp Fire Girl, Ruth had found reason speedily to change her pessimistic views regarding the disturber of her plans. To begin with, Marian was so exactly the opposite of the unflattering picture Ruth had drawn of her, that she experienced more than one secret pang of contrition for her hastily-formed conclusion. Marian daily proved herself to be an ideal guest, and her cheery way of looking at life, coupled with an unusually keen sense

of humor, was a constant source of amusement and delight to the Garniers.

Privately, Ruth had greatly deplored the long letter, permeated with the bitterness of her disappointment, which she had written to Betty Wyndham. She awaited Betty's answer with considerable trepidation, and, when finally it arrived, she locked herself in her room, almost unwilling to read it. After she had read as far as the third page, her heavy self-reproach suddenly took wing. Glancing hastily through the remainder of it, she rushed downstairs to the living room where her cousin sat reading and proceeded to do a jubilant dance about the amazed Marian.

Determined that Ruth must make one of her house-party, Betty had graciously proposed that Marian should accompany her to the Catskills, assuring her that there would be plenty of room in the cottage for another girl.

When the excited girl had extended Betty's invitation to Marian, the latter had gently declined it, but had urged Ruth to accept, stating simply that she was quite content to remain quietly with Mr. and Mrs. Garnier. This in itself was sufficient to cause Ruth to make an energetic onslaught upon her cousin's mild objections. In the end,

Marian had been won over, and the two girls had made haste to interview Mrs. Garnier and obtain the seal of her approval. Several busy happy days of planning and preparation had followed, with the result that on this sunny Monday morning two thoroughly congenial and highly excited Camp Fire comrades were prepared to take the long trail to the mountains.

More than once during the ride to the station Ruth smiled to herself as she recalled the gloomy state of mind in which she had approached that very spot, a little over a week before, to meet the girl she had condemned without a hearing.

It was to be rather a long journey across the country, and, as they would be obliged to spend one night on the train, Mr. Garnier had telegraphed for sleeping-car accommodations. Once in New York they were to go directly to the Grand Central Station, there to entrain for Haines Falls, where Betty was to meet them. The Wyndham's cottage was situated in the very heart of the Catskills, Betty had stated in her letter, but aside from this vague information neither Ruth nor Marian had the slightest idea of the territory into which they were going. Therefore both girls were filled with the pleasant sensation of adventurers

who were about to set foot in an undiscovered land.

"Oh, dear," sighed Ruth as she followed her mother out of the automobile at the station yard, "I am positively torn between being sorry to leave you, Mumsie, and glad because I'm going on such a wonderful trip."

"You mustn't think of me, my dear," was her mother's generous counsel. "You know I am not only willing but anxious for you to have this pleasure. If you don't smile your very brightest when you say good-bye to me, I shall be sad after you have left me."

"You're the most unselfish mother in the world!" exclaimed Ruth impulsively, "and you mustn't dare to talk of being sad after we have gone. I'll think of you every minute I'm away and write you two letters a day."

"If I receive two letters a week from you I shall consider myself lucky," commented her mother slyly. Ruth's lapses in the matter of prompt correspondence were a subject for jest in the Garnier family.

"Now, Mumsie, you know my intentions are good," defended Ruth. "I'll write you a little every day, see if I don't."

"If Ruth is too busy, I'll volunteer to be a faithful scribe," promised Marian. "Between the two of us, you stand a fair chance of receiving a daily bulletin of who's who and what's what in the Catskills."

"After such lavish promises I shall be deeply disappointed if the postman doesn't stop at every round," asserted Mrs. Garnier brightly. Then, her face suddenly sobered, she said, "I'm not going to send my girls away with a lecture, but I am going to ask you to take the best possible care of yourselves and do nothing that will expose you to criticism or danger. Look before you leap, and don't leap unless you are very sure where you are going to land. That's all. If you will remember that, then you can be safely trusted to go almost anywhere. Of course, I have a great deal of confidence in Miss Drexal; still, it rests largely with you whether you are going to prove yourselves genuine Camp Fire Girls."

"I'll be as wise as—as an owl and as careful as can be, Mumsie. I promise." Ruth wagged her brown head with emphatic earnestness.

"We solemnly promise not to get lost in the woods, tumble down mountains, speak to strangers, go canoeing down waterfalls or eat

anything likely to disagree with us," was Marian's humorous enumeration. "I think I've covered at least all the most important of the possible disasters."

"Camp Fire Girls are naturally supposed to be ready to meet emergencies, yet be careful as well as brave," said Ruth proudly. "That's a part of their business."

"I am sure I can trust you both to do the right thing at the right moment," was Mrs. Garnier's fond assurance.

The arrival of the train which was to bear the travelers east put an end to the little talk. There was time only for affectionate farewells, then Marian and Ruth, disdaining the porter's assistance, hurried up the Pullman car steps and into the train. A moment and Ruth had raised the window, which for a wonder did not stick. She leaned far out, nodding and smiling to her mother. Marian peered anxiously over Ruth's shoulder for a last glimpse of the gracious figure on the platform.

"Good-bye! Good-bye!" called two fresh young voices. Then the train began to move. Ruth continued to lean out the window as they left the station behind them, her handkerchief fluttering

a white signal of farewell. When at last she settled back in her chair, there was a suspicious mist in her brown eyes. It was all very well to be going on a wonderful adventure into the unknown; nevertheless it hurt to say good-bye to her mother.

For at least five minutes there was silence between the two girls. Ruth's heart was with the dear one left behind, while Marian's mind reverted to her own mother, to whom only a year ago she had said an eternal farewell.

"Saying good-bye is terribly hard." It was Ruth who at last broke the spell.

"I know it," returned Marian briefly. Her face held a pathetic expression that made Ruth remark hastily:

"Just think, though, what a good time we are going to have and how soon we'll be back home again. It isn't as though we were going away for a whole year."

Marian brightened visibly. "Do you know, Ruth, I feel just as though your house were really my home, even though I've only lived in it a little over a week."

"Of course it's your home," returned Ruth quickly. "You are to stay with us as long as

you like, and I'll give you half of my father and mother for your very own."

Unluckily Ruth's impulsive speech brought a return of the somber look that she had endeavored, the moment before, to dispel from her cousin's face. Quick to note it she racked her brain for a remedy. Suddenly she giggled outright.

"Marian," she began, her face dimpling mischievously, "I've a confession to make." Then she plunged into an extremely frank account of that memorable morning when she had rebelled so bitterly against her cousin's coming, and of the altogether incorrect impression she had formed regarding her. Of her letter to Betty Wyndham she said nothing. She had already rectified that error with a second letter to Betty of a distinctly different tone. "Wasn't I the biggest goose ever?" she laughingly concluded. "Never again, as long as I live, will I form an impression of anyone before seeing the person. It's a waste of valuable time."

As Ruth had confidently hoped, Marian was vastly amused at the confession and not in the least offended. Better still, the somber light in her eyes had vanished, and as the train rushed on

past sleepy villages, long stretches of farm land, dingy smoke-blackened towns and picturesque bits of forest, the two girls continued to talk happily on of the many interests common to carefree young womanhood.

Ruth was enthusiastic in her descriptions of the girls who were to make up the house-party. She dwelt particularly, however, on her roommate at school, Emmeline Cerrito. "She is so beautiful that you will simply adore her," she declared, "and she isn't a bit conceited over herself and her wonderful voice. Speaking of wrong impressions makes me remember what a ridiculous idea some of us had about Emmy. Really it was awful. You see she didn't put in an appearance at Miss Belaire's for quite a while after we came. As she was to be my roommate, I was very curious about her. We knew she was from Nicaragua, and we couldn't help wondering whether she would be as white as the rest of us. Sometimes those Latin-Americans are—well—quite dark. When you see her you will understand why she surprised us. For a while I thought I'd never learn to know her, but later on we became the best of friends. She didn't take kindly to the Camp Fire idea, though, and didn't really join until almost

the end of the year. I am anxious for you to know each other. You are so clever and say such funny things that she will surely appreciate you. She doesn't know about you yet, unless Betty has written her that I am going to bring you along. I answered Emmy's letter before you came and I didn't mention Betty's invitation, for I was afraid of giving out the good news too soon and spoiling things for Betty herself."

"I hope your friend Emmy *will* like me, and not consider me a—a—nuisance," Marian returned hesitatingly. It had occurred to her that this dear friend of Ruth's might regard her as an intruder. "She may want you all to herself."

"Oh, you needn't be afraid of that," came the comforting assurance. "In the first place she can't help liking you. Besides, she will like you because you are my cousin. Emmy is too sweet and generous to be jealous. She wouldn't be so silly." Ruth spoke with a positiveness that betokened firm faith in her roommate. But despite her confident prediction, she was destined to learn a number of decidedly surprising things about Emmeline Cerrito of which she had hitherto never even dreamed.

CHAPTER IV

THE SHADOW

"At last!" Ruth Garnier gave a deep sigh of relief and anticipation as she listened to the stentorian call, "Haines Falls! Haines Falls!" With an energy born of the desire ever to be up and doing, she reached to the rack above her head for her hat and Marian's. Hastily adjusting her broad-brimmed Panama, she began to collect her baggage.

It was after eleven o'clock on the glorious Tuesday morning that marked the end of a rather uneventful journey, and with the prospect of reunion so close at hand, Ruth was seized with an overwhelming desire to rush past the patient line of luggage-laden travelers that had already begun to move toward the end of the car, and anticipate her arrival at the Falls by at least two minutes. As she fell in line with the slow-moving procession, she bent eager eyes on the station platform of which she caught aggravating glimpses as she plodded on.

"Oh, there's Betty!" In passing, Ruth took

a final peep through the window nearest the train vestibule, then a jubilant cry rose to her lips. "Come on, Marian!" The next moment a blue-clad figure had left the train with precipitate haste and was making for a knot of young women in smart summer attire who stood at one end of the platform watching the train with expectant eyes.

"You dear things!" Ruth had launched herself straight into the center of the waiting group and proceeded ecstatically to embrace a tall, dignified girl in white, who returned the embrace with equally joyous abandon.

"Oh, my glasses!" Betty Wyndham released Ruth and clutched frantically at her descending eye-glasses, retrieving them with a dexterous swoop before they reached the platform and destruction. Ruth became enmeshed in a tangle of twining arms, while six eager voices were raised in a confused attempt at individual welcome. The Seven Savage Maidens were decidedly on the scene, as was evidenced by the tolerant, smiling glances which the bystanders cast in their direction.

"And every one of you are here ahead of me," cried Ruth, beaming affectionately upon the circle

of welcoming faces. "Oh, goodness! I almost forgot Marian!" She broke from the fondly detaining arms and drew her cousin, who had remained modestly in the background, into the midst of the company. "Girls, this is my cousin, Marian Selby. She's a perfect dear and an ardent Camp Fire Girl. Marian, behold the other six Savage Maidens. I shan't try to tell you their names and histories. They'll tell you themselves. All except Betty. As hostess it is my duty to present you formally to her."

Betty Wyndham took Marian's hand in both hers, saying earnestly: "Ruth has written me of you and said so many nice things about you that I think we are lucky to have such a pleasant addition to our house-party. I am so glad you decided to come."

"Very pretty, Bettina," laughed Ruth. "You are an ideal hostess from the word go. Now, Anne, show us what you can do in the way of a welcome address. Any little details of your personal history will be appreciated."

"I'm just Anne Follett, and my history isn't very important. I suspect you know a good deal about us already from Ruth. I am ever so glad to know you."

A slender, golden-haired girl with a sweet, serious face, lighted by appealing brown eyes, now stretched forth a small welcoming hand.

"I'm next, and allow me to state in the beginning that I'm just plain Jane," said Jane Pellew briskly, her snapping black eyes glowing with friendliness as her thin brown fingers closed over Marian's.

"Hear! Hear! Everybody please remember for future reference that we have with us this morning, 'just plain Jane,'" called a tall, fair-haired girl, who proceeded to introduce herself as Sarah Manning of Nevada. Frances Bliss was the next to claim attention, shaking Marian's hand with true western heartiness.

Emmeline Cerrito was last of the six girls to express her pleasure at meeting Marian. She did so in a courteous but restrained fashion that was in decided contrast to the smiling friendliness of the others. Marian experienced a curious sensation of disappointment as she replied to the suave murmur of polite welcome that fell from Emmy's lips.

Ruth's description of the beautiful girl had not been extravagant. From her plaited gown of soft white China silk to the tips of her trim white buck-

skin shoes she was perfection, and Marian recognized in the apparent simplicity of her frock that air of distinctive smartness which only a French modiste can impart to the plainest gown. Under her white hemp hat the beauty of the French girl's face looked out with startling effect. Yet something in the expression of the velvety black eyes sent a sudden chill to Marian's heart. She fancied she read dislike in their depths. She instantly dismissed the apprehension and replied in kind to Emmy's greeting, but she was relieved when Betty Wyndham broke in upon them with solicitous inquiries regarding the journey. She tried to fix her attention on what Betty was saying, but she could not help noting that Emmy turned away from her, with the bored air of one who has performed a perfunctory act of civility, and proceeded to monopolize Ruth.

"We are going to take you to the hotel," explained Betty to Marian. "We'll have luncheon there, then we shall motor to our cottage. It is only a matter of two miles, and if we were in regulation Camp Fire clothes we'd live up to our reputation by walking there, but we decided to dress up a little in honor of you girls, and so for once we'll be lazy and ride. Luckily Emmy

brought her car and it's large enough to hold eight girls. By the way, is this all of your luggage?" She pointed to the two bulging suitcases and the leather traveling bag that had been hastily deposited on the station platform during the moment of greeting.

"No; we each have a steamer trunk. We had so many things to pack that we couldn't begin to get them all into our suit cases," replied Marian.

"Give me your checks and I'll go to the baggage room and leave orders where to forward your trunks," directed Betty.

"Here is mine." Fumbling in her handbag Marian produced her check. "Oh, Ruth," she turned to her cousin who was deep in conversation with Emmy. An almost imperceptible frown appeared between the French girl's dark brows at the interruption. It was not lost on Marian, who keenly sensitive, fancied she again read disapproval of herself in that faint puckering of Emmy's forehead.

"What is it?" Ruth's eyes momentarily sought her cousin's as she asked the question.

"Give me your check. Miss Wyndham wishes to arrange with the baggage master about our trunks."

"You don't mean 'Miss Wyndham!'" corrected her hostess genially. "You mean 'Betty.' We are going to dispense with the 'Miss' on all occasions. It's too stiff and formal, and if we are to be rollicking Camp Fire comrades we must dismiss ceremony—that is, unless it happens to be an occasion of solemn Camp Fire rites." Then addressing the group: "Go ahead, girls, to the automobile. I'll attend to these checks and be with you directly."

Half a dozen willing hands possessed themselves of the newcomers' luggage. In obedience to Betty's direction, the party of girls strolled across the platform toward the yard behind the station, making the air ring with joyous talk and laughter. Marian found herself walking beside Jane Pellew. She noted that Emmy and Ruth had taken the lead, and, with arms firmly linked, appeared to be completely absorbed in each other.

"Emmy has an awful crush on Ruth," remarked Jane, who had observed the direction of Marian's gaze. "Of course, I can't blame her. They were roommates last year and Ruth really made her over."

"She is very beautiful," praised Marian. "I think she's the prettiest brunette I ever saw."

"She is 'some looker,' as my brother would say. Still—" Jane broke off abruptly, with an expressive shrug. "Ruth understands her," she added quickly, as though apologizing for the shrug.

Emmeline Cerrito had elected to drive her own car. She and Ruth reached it a trifle ahead of the others. "Get in beside me," she commanded. "I want you all to myself."

"All right," nodded Ruth. Nevertheless she cast a half-regretful glance toward the tonneau of the automobile.

"You can sit in the tonneau—if you like." Despite the languid drawl in Emmy's voice she was far from being indifferent. Her jealous eyes had caught Ruth's quick glance and interpreted it correctly. "I thought perhaps you'd like to sit by me."

"Of course I would." Ruth stifled her brief disappointment and replied heartily.

By this time the girls had bestowed themselves snugly in the big brown machine and were waiting for Betty Wyndham. It was at least five minutes before she appeared.

"I had to wait," she apologized. "A fussy old gentleman saw the baggage master first, and I had

to cultivate the noble virtue of patience until he finished telling the poor man how to run the baggage room."

"I've saved six whole inches of room for you, Betty," announced Sarah Manning generously. "If you think that's too much, or possibly too little, you can sit on my lap."

"I'll accept the six inches and as much more as I can steal," laughed Betty as she climbed into the car. "All right, Emmy. Go ahead."

Once the car had left the station behind and turned into a wide tree-lined street, Emmy leaned toward Ruth and said in a low tone, "Tell me about this cousin of yours, Ruth. How in the world did you happen to bring her along? You never mentioned her in your letter."

"Well," began Ruth, "it's quite a tale." In an equally low tone she recounted the story of Marian's unexpected letter, followed by her arrival at Burton. Determined to atone for her mistaken idea of Marian, Ruth was loyally silent on the subject of her unjust tirade against the girl she had judged before seeing.

"But weren't you awfully angry when you knew that her coming might spoil your trip?" quizzed Emmy. "And how did you manage to get her

invited to the house-party? Betty is so frosty about strangers."

A sudden flush dyed Ruth's cheeks. "I didn't 'manage' at all," she said with a hint of stiffness. "I wrote Betty and told her that I couldn't accept her invitation on account of Marian's visit and she wrote back that she would be delighted to have Marian as a guest. The moment I met Marian and saw her bracelet I knew we were sure to be friends. She is the dearest girl and so clever. She says the funniest things in a dry sort of way that keeps you laughing all the time."

Ruth's enthusiastic praise of Marian awoke no responsive echo in Emmy. Her dark brows drew together in a straight line. It was too provoking in Ruth, she thought, to make so much fuss over this intruding cousin. "I think you might at least have written me about her," she said sulkily. "I came up here on purpose to be with you, and now this cousin of yours will be sure to separate us."

"Why, Emmy!" Ruth's brown eyes were wide with surprise. "I never thought you'd feel this way about Marian. I could have written you about her, but when I knew that I was going to see you so soon I decided it would be better to wait. I didn't wish to spoil the surprise of Betty's

invitation, either. She wrote me that she was sending it to all of us on the same mail."

"How did you know I'd accept Betty's invitation?" demanded Emmy.

"I didn't *know,* but I supposed you would." Ruth looked distressed.

"You should have written me. If I had known this cousin of yours was with you I'd have stayed in Newport. I'm not half so much in love with this Camp Fire idea as I might be. It was you I was anxious to see."

"But you liked it ever so much last spring," reminded Ruth.

"Last spring isn't now," pouted Emmy. "Never mind. I'll just have to make the best of it. I do hope, though, that you won't consider yourself tied to this Marian's apron strings."

Ruth bit her lip in silent vexation. This was a state of affairs on which she had not reckoned. She had never dreamed that Emmy could be jealous of anyone. She had always appeared so calmly indifferent. Nevertheless, right was right. She did not intend to begin her vacation by yielding to Emmy's unreasonable attitude, much as she liked her.

"It was ever so nice in you to come up here

just for me, Emmy," she said quietly. "Please believe I appreciate it. I am anxious to be with you, too, but Marian is my cousin and I like her immensely. I hope she will be friends with the girls, but still I feel that it is my duty to help her to have a good time while she is with us."

"Oh, very well, do just as you please." Emmy's voice was freighted with icy indifference. "I dare say I shan't stay here very long, anyway. I don't fancy living in a cottage will prove highly exciting. If it bores me I shall know what to do. Here we are at the hotel. You had better see to your cousin. Very likely she is furious with me by this time for monopolizing you." Emmy brought the car to a standstill in front of a picturesque hostelry almost entirely surrounded by silver birch trees.

"What a beautiful place!" Ruth forgot her recent vexation as she gazed in admiration at the beautiful hotel peeping out from its guard of silver-trunked birches that seemed to rustle a greeting.

Emmy made no response as she flounced out of the car and stood moodily watching the bevy of girls alight. "I'm going to the postoffice," she announced briefly. "I'll join you later." Climbing

into the car she drove off. Ruth stared after her rapidly vanishing back with troubled eyes. Then she faced about, forcing herself to smile. She did not wish the others to suspect that all was not absolutely serene between herself and her roommate.

"Come along, all of you," invited Betty, leading the way up the wide stone walk. Marian fell in step with her, for Anne Follett had already slipped a soft little hand into Ruth's and the affectionate way in which she clung to her showed plainly the large place in her heart which Ruth occupied. Sarah, Jane Pellew and Frances Bliss brought up the rear, a seemingly merry and contented trio. But Jane alone of the flock of girls had observed threatening signs in Emmy's abrupt departure. "Emmy doesn't like it because Ruth brought her cousin," was her shrewd mental conclusion. "I always thought she had it in her to be jealous. I hope to goodness she gets over it in a hurry. If she doesn't, then look out for squalls. I imagine she could be very disagreeable if she happened to feel like it."

But the precise extent of Emmy's powers of aggression were yet to be revealed.

CHAPTER V

ON THE ROAD TO WANDERER'S ROOST

It was an apparently congenial company that gathered at a round table at one end of the pretty dining room of Silver Birch Inn for luncheon. On rejoining her friends, Emmeline Cerrito's beautiful face showed no indication of the angry tumult which still surged within her. She laughed and talked with unusual animation, hiding her displeasure with Ruth under a cloak of such lightsome good humor that even sharp-eyed Jane Pellew was obliged for the time being to desert the opinion she had privately formed of her. Ruth on the contrary was not deceived by Emmy's high spirits. She knew that the latter had purposely seated herself across the table from her, and that she was far from being over the pettishness which she had exhibited during the ride to the hotel. But she also knew that Emmy was altogether too proud to air her grievances in public. She doubted if her roommate would even broach the subject of Marian again to her. Nevertheless she was distinctly aware of the barrier that Emmy saw fit

to build up deliberately between them, and the knowledge of it saddened her at the moment when she wished to be so happy.

Despite the shadow that hung over two members of the house party, the luncheon passed off merrily and with much gayety. They lingered long over their dessert and it was Betty who at last reminded them that there were other pleasures in store for them.

"It's after two, children," she announced, consulting her wrist watch. "Far be it from me, as hostess, to tear you away from this festal board, but I'm awfully anxious for Ruth and Emmy and Marian to see our humble cot."

"Why, Emmy!" exclaimed Ruth in surprise. "I didn't know you hadn't been to the cottage yet. I supposed you were already an established fixture there. When did you arrive here? I know it's rather late in the day to be asking that, but we had so many other things to say when we first met that I forgot to inquire the precise moment you dawned upon Haines Falls."

"Oh, Emmy's been at Silver Birch Inn for the last two days," informed Betty. "She wouldn't allow herself even a peep at 'Wanderer's Roost' —that's the name of our hut—until—"

"Until my car came," finished Emmy abruptly. She had divined the ending of Betty's sentence and forestalled her. If Ruth preferred that stupid cousin to herself, she would not give her the satisfaction of knowing that she had waited for her roommate's arrival before visiting the cottage.

"I thought you were waiting for Ruth," blurted Frances Bliss with her usual frankness. "Don't you remember you told us that you wanted to wait— "

"Certainly I was anxious to see Ruth," interrupted Emmy, turning her dark eyes almost belligerently upon this innocent blunderer. "It's possible to kill two birds with one stone, isn't it? "

"If I didn't know that 'Wanderer's Roost' was even nicer than Silver Birch Inn, I should hate to leave here," broke in Anne Follett eagerly. She had caught the hurt look which had sprung into Ruth's eyes at Emmy's almost insolent question and had risen to the occasion. What had prompted Emmy to speak thus, she was at a loss to understand. To be sure, the latter was ruled by many moods. At school she had been known to change in a twinkling from ardent friendliness to a polite indifference, bordering on actual dis-

like. As the year progressed, however, she had improved vastly under Ruth's sunny influence. Away from Ruth, she had, no doubt, lapsed into her old provoking manner. But now that they were to be together again, Anne was convinced that all would be well. It would be wisest to ignore Emmy's darker moods, and Anne resolved to whisper this to the others at the first opportunity.

As for Ruth herself, she was feeling the hurt of Emmy's speech too greatly for words. A strange silence had settled down upon her, momentarily tying her tongue. She understood only too clearly Emmy's insinuation that it had been anxiety for the arrival of her car rather than fondness for her roommate that had kept her at the Inn. Then her sturdy independence reasserted itself. This was not the time to mourn over personal differences. Betty had gone to a great deal of trouble to give pleasure to herself and her friends. They owed it to her to show their loyal appreciation.

"I'd like to start for 'Wanderer's Roost' at once," she said brightly, rising from the table. "I'm crazy to get into my dear old Camp Fire clothes and begin living the simple life."

Her cheery manner broke the slight reserve occasioned by Emmy's inexplicable behavior. Her companions instantly responding, the party of girls trooped out of the dining room, conversing at a lively rate. Emmy alone had little to say. She strolled out to the veranda a trifle ahead of the others and continued on down the walk to where her automobile was stationed.

"Want to ride on the front seat, Jane?" she called with studied carelessness as the others came up with her.

"De-lighted," was Jane's prompt response. Her first opinion had been revived by Emmy's retort to Frances. She therefore reflected that, given a chance, she might help Ruth's cause along. She intended to try, at any rate, and Emmy's invitation promised possible favorable results.

"Much obliged, Emmy," laughed Anne. "Not that we of the tonneau are anxious to be rid of plain Jane, but we'd like to take turns interviewing Ruth. It's positively noble in you to give us a chance."

"Very glad you think so," was Emmy's crisp rejoinder. "Pile in and we'll be on our way."

"Sit here, Ruth," urged Frances Bliss, patting a vacant space between herself and Sarah Man-

ning. "We are dying to have the pleasure of your charming person at close range. Then Sarah and I can both talk in your ears at once."

"It's a good thing this car is large enough to hold this entire aggregation of savage but beauteous maidens," smiled Anne Follett. "Once reunited, we prefer being crowded in an auto to separation."

"We were crowded in an auto,
Not a girl was left behind.
It was midday in the Catskills,
And we all were quite resigned
To being jammed and jumbled
As we journeyed to our lair,
For our Emmy'd sworn to land us
Strictly right side up with care!"

chanted Frances Bliss in admirable paraphrase of that timeworn poem, "We Were Crowded in the Cabin."

"Hurrah for Frances!" cried Jane Pellew. "That's what I should call a marvelous inspiration. How on earth do you do it, Frances?"

"Oh, I don't know." Frances flushed. "It just comes to me. My sister and I used to sit on our veranda and make rhymes about the people

that went by. I'd start a rhyme and she'd finish it. Sometimes they were so funny that we'd simply shriek with laughter. Then the folks that passed would look up at us as if they thought we were crazy. I suppose that's where I learned to do it. We certainly had practice enough."

"I can't make rhymes at all," asserted Betty Wyndham. "I suppose it's because I'm too matter-of-fact."

"Marian can write verses," announced Ruth. "She let me read some that she wrote last year in college and they are wonderful. She writes perfectly splendid stories, too."

Marian grew very red under the battery of interested eyes bent upon her. "Oh, they don't amount to so much," she murmured.

Unluckily Emmy had turned about for an instant, her attention attracted by the laughter which Frances' paraphrase had evoked. She was just in time to hear Ruth's remark. It merely added fuel to the fire that raged within her and she faced front with an angry jerk that caused Jane Pellew to ask, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she muttered, drawing her black brows into such a ferocious scowl that Jane forebore to question her further.

Ruth's announcement had, however, awakened within her friends a keen interest in Marian, and they proceeded to draw her out, questioning her about her life at Winton College and relating various events that had taken place at Miss Belaire's. Without intention, she soon found herself the center of their conversation and forgetting her usual shyness soon had them laughing over the droll account of things that had happened to her and various others of her friends during their freshman year at Winton.

Ruth listened happily to her cousin's ridiculous anecdotes. Above all she wished the girls to like Marian for herself. Now that she had emerged from her shell and proved herself such good company, she was in a fair way to become a popular member of the house-party. To Ruth the ride to the cottage was in itself a joy. A true lover of nature, she was keenly alive to the picturesque beauty of the country about her. She was content to sit silent, breathing in the fragrant, spicy air. As her eyes dwelt eagerly on the distant wooded slopes, her mind reverted to the immortal Rip Van Winkle who had lain down and slept away twenty years of his life in this fairyland through which they were now passing.

"What are you dreaming about, Ruth?" Betty had observed the musing light in her friend's brown eyes.

"I was thinking of Rip Van Winkle," smiled Ruth. "I don't see how he could possibly have stayed asleep for twenty years in this wonderful land. There must be a great many interesting places to go and things to see about here."

"There are loads of them. There's Sunset Rock, Fawn's Leap, Boulder Rock, Kaaterskill Falls, Alligator Rock and lots of other interesting spots. Haines Falls is worth seeing and there's the Otis incline railway, too, that goes right up into the mountains. I love Sunset Rock best of all. The view from there is simply marvelous. But you'll see them all. We shall make pilgrimages to every picturesque spot in this vicinity."

"How far are we from the cottage?" Emmy had halted the automobile and turned halfway about, addressing her remark directly to Betty. Jane Pellew compressed her lips a trifle. Thus far on the journey she had instructed Emmy regarding the way to "Wanderer's Roost." She was perfectly capable of answering Emmy's question, but it seemed that this taciturn young person had set out to be perverse, even in small matters.

In reality Emmy had merely sought an excuse that would give her an opportunity to discover what was going on behind her. She had half hoped to see Ruth looking unhappy. She deserved to suffer for her stupid obstinacy. But Ruth did not appear to be even disturbed. She was talking animatedly to Sarah Manning and smiling so cheerfully that Emmy whisked angrily about without waiting for Betty's answer.

"We are almost there, Emmy," called Betty. "You can't drive directly up to the Roost over this road. It stands on a little bluff, and we'll have to walk to get there. Jane will tell you where to stop. She knows the way."

Shortly afterward, this time at Jane's somewhat chilly direction, Emmy brought her car to a standstill in front of a large, old-fashioned house. Fenced in, it stood a little back from the road in the midst of a close-cut lawn. A wide driveway curved to one side of it and behind it was a smaller brick building that looked like a garage. Situated at the terminus of the highway beyond it was a small open space that ended where a fairly steep hill began.

"Is this your cottage, Betty?" asked Ruth in surprise.

"Oh, no, you can't see the Roost from here. There is our trail ahead of us." She pointed to a narrow path winding up the hillside, which appeared to end at its top.

"But it looks as though it ended at the crest of that hill," rejoined Ruth, her eyes on the thick-growing bushes above, where the trail was lost to view.

The girls still sat in the car, their gaze fixed on the wavering path Betty had pointed out.

"Those bushes merely hide it," explained Betty. "It's there just the same, only it goes down the other side and up again between two hills that form a regular pass. When you reach that pass you can see the Roost. It's right at the head of it. When we are standing in front of the cottage we can look down and see anyone who comes, long before they reach the Roost. If these woods were full of Indians attacking us we could hold the cottage against them as long as our ammunition held out. I suppose at one time or another, long ago, the pioneers may have held this very pass against the Indians. This part of the country was once overrun with savages. Sometimes I've stood at the top of the bluff and wondered what I'd do if a painted Indian were sud-

denly to stalk out from among the trees, tomahawk and all."

"We ought to be thankful that we are living in the days of automobiles and Indian reservations," laughed Frances Bliss. "Just imagine how dreadful it was for those poor pioneers to be awakened in the middle of the night by blood-curdling warwhoops!"

"Don't mention it," shuddered Sarah. "If you keep on talking about such horrors, I'll dream of them to-night, and I warn you my nightmares are anything but quiet little affairs."

"I can testify to that fact," giggled Frances. "I remember distinctly one night last year when Sarah and I finished a big box of Huyler's before we went to bed. Sarah had been reading the 'Tale of Two Cities' for English Four and was trying to work out an original in geometry at the same time. The consequence was, she dreamed she went to geometry class and couldn't do the original and Miss Melby took her by the hair, jammed her into a big basket and dragged her off to the chapel to be guillotined. Naturally, Sarah objected. She objected so loudly that she woke me up just as she fell out of bed, screaming, 'I won't have my head cut off!'"

A shout of laughter went up as Frances finished with the condemned Sarah's frantic protest. Sarah grinned rather sheepishly.

Emmeline Cerrito had taken no part in the merriment. She leaned back in her seat, the picture of bored tolerance.

"You can leave your car in the garage back of this house, Emmy," explained Betty. "The man who lives here promised to look after it. I have already made arrangements for it. I thought you'd like to have it near you. Just below here is a crossroad that leads to another highway. We call it the back road, because it runs below the Roost and is only a little way from it. You can walk down from the Roost through the Pass to this garage and drive your car around almost to our back door any time you feel like doing so. I meant to tell you before, but it slipped my mind."

"Thank you just the same, but I think I had rather leave my car at the Inn garage. I am quite anxious to go back to Haines Falls for several reasons. Later in the afternoon, I'll have one of the men at the Inn garage make the drive here with me. Then he can take the car back."

"But wouldn't you prefer to have your car nearer the cottage, Emmy?" argued Betty.

"The man I speak of is a friend of father's and has a large garage. It will be perfectly safe there."

"I have already made arrangements for it at the Inn garage," repeated Emmy with stubborn finality. "I'll see you later." As she spoke she began backing the automobile, preparatory to turning around. A little to the rear an open space offered sufficient room for the turn.

The group of girls stood watching her in silence. What was the matter with Emmy? She had been all smiles and graciousness that morning when they had gone to the train to meet Ruth. Now she had mysteriously changed into the bored, indifferent Miss Cerrito whom they had regarded with mingled awe and diffidence when she had first put in a tardy appearance at Miss Belaire's Academy. Jane Pellew thought she understood, but Ruth alone knew the reason for this curiously unpleasant transformation. She took a step forward as though about to speak to Emmy. Then she drew back. She would make no attempt at conciliation. Her roommate's grievance was without cause, therefore she would let her get over it as best she might.

CHAPTER VI

STANDING BY HER COLORS

"What has come over Emmy?" was Betty Wyndham's perplexed inquiry as the French girl and her car rapidly disappeared from view. "She was as gay as a lark this morning. I can't think of anything I have said or done to offend her."

"Don't worry about Emmy, Betty," was Jane Pellew's impatient counsel. The subject of Emmy's moods had ceased to be of interest to matter-of-fact Jane. Having been unable to ferret out the cause of the former's peculiar behavior she was quite ready to dismiss the matter from her active mind and go on to something infinitely more pleasant. Of an alert, restless disposition, she had not the patience to explore the intricacies of a temperament so complex as Emmeline Cerrito's.

"I don't believe she is offended with anyone," declared Frances bluntly. "When we first met her she was like that. Sarah and I thought she didn't like us the least little bit, but we soon decided it was only her way. I was really sur-

prised when she joined the Camp Fire band. She wasn't in the least enthusiastic about it, at first. Don't you remember?"

"Ruth is responsible for Emmy's conversion," asserted Anne. "It was because she grew so fond of our Ruth that she joined." She cast an affectionate smile at the latter.

Ruth returned it rather faintly. She wondered what her companions would say if she told them that she and Emmy had disagreed almost in the moment of meeting. Naturally frank in all her dealings, she disliked having to conceal anything from those she esteemed and trusted. It was hard indeed to enter upon this happy vacation with a cloud of Emmy's own willful creation hanging over her. She hoped that her roommate would speedily come to a realization of her own childishness and become her old fascinating self again. When Emmy returned that afternoon, Ruth made up her mind to show her in every possible way that Marian's presence at the house-party could make no difference in their friendship.

"There isn't the least use in standing here all day, children," was Betty's brisk comment. "The sooner we strike the Roost, the sooner we can show our worthy colleagues around."

"'Worthy colleagues' is good," retorted Ruth, resolutely banishing her own gloomy reflections. "Let us hope we can live up to it. Lead on, my dear Miss Wyndham." She made an exaggerated bow to Betty.

As the party of wayfarers, headed by Betty, began the ascent of the little hill, Ruth found herself walking beside Anne.

"What is the trouble between you and Emmy, dear?" Anne's voice was keyed just above a whisper. As she spoke she slipped a soft little hand into Ruth's.

"I thought you noticed, Anne, from the way you changed the subject while we were at the Inn," Ruth said in an undertone.

"Yes, I saw that something was wrong. If you'd rather not tell me, then please forget that I asked you."

"You are a dear and I'd tell you sooner than I would anyone else, but it isn't really very serious and if you don't mind I'd rather not talk about it. I'm sure Emmy will be all right when she returns."

Anne gave Ruth's hand an understanding squeeze, which meant that, so far as she was concerned, the matter was ended then and there.

They had now reached the other side of the hill and ahead of and above them Ruth caught her first glimpse of Wanderer's Roost. Her imagination had pictured the cottage as rather a modest affair; she was therefore not prepared for the large and picturesque dwelling that met her eyes. Surrounded by graceful silver birches it stood on a fairly steep bluff at the head of the Pass. "How beautiful!" she exclaimed.

"Isn't it, though?" agreed Anne warmly. "And it's ever so much nicer inside the cottage. Betty is lucky to have such a lovely place in which to entertain her friends. I was crazy about it the very first minute I saw it, and the more I see of it the better I like it. Now that we are all here, we'll have a glorious time. I'm so sorry that Miss Drexal couldn't come. Betty had quite a time getting some one for a house mother. Finally her aunt said she'd come. If she hadn't —well, the Seven Savage Maidens would have had the pleasure of staying at home, I suppose. That is the penalty we pay for being just girls. We always need some responsible person along to look after us."

"I know it," sighed Ruth. She had always privately mourned at having not been born a boy.

"Still, girls can be as self-reliant and brave as boys. Camp Fire Girls, I mean."

"Of course they can," nodded Anne. "Who knows, we may be able to do something really heroic while we are up here. But even if we don't find an opportunity to display our valor we can show Betty how much we appreciate her by being pleased with everything."

"Mother says it's the little things that count most, after all," said Ruth softly. "If we do them cheerfully and well, the big things will take care of themselves."

"It's a pretty hard standard to live up to," sighed Anne.

"I know it. All we can do is to keep on trying."

"Hurry along, you laggers!" Jane Pellew's brisk call brought the two friends to a sudden realization of their whereabouts. Deeply absorbed in their talk, they had unconsciously dropped behind the others.

"Come on, Anne." Ruth took firm hold of her friend's arm and started up the Pass at a swinging pace. Anne responded nobly and they soon brought up at the top of the elevation on which the cottage stood. For an instant Ruth forgot

everything as her beauty-loving eyes rested upon the wonderful panorama which Nature had spread before her with a lavish hand. From the point where she stood she could follow the narrow pass to the point where it seemed to end in a wall of living green. Her vivid fancy pictured a solitary pioneer lying concealed among the riot of bushes that fringed the bluff, his rifle at his shoulder, his alert eyes fixed on a line of painted savages slowly creeping up the narrow trail.

"Wake up, Ruth," Betty's laughing voice at her elbow dispelled her day dream. "I hate to tear you away from this," she waved a comprehensive hand in the direction of the Pass, "but Aunt Louise is standing in the doorway of the Roost, waiting for us."

"It's all so marvelous." Ruth's face shone with positive reverence. As she turned away she asked, "What is the name of the Pass, Betty?"

"It hasn't any, so far as I know," returned Betty lightly. "Would you like to give it a handle?"

"Oh, may I?" questioned Ruth eagerly. "To tell you the truth, I'd already named it to myself. I'd like to call it 'Lookout Pass.'"

"That's a splendid name," approved Betty

with enthusiasm. "We'll have a formal christening to-night after dinner and smash a bottle of grape juice on that rock down there. Provided we can hit it. But my long suffering aunt is still waiting to welcome you."

The other members of the party had already crossed the short stretch of well-kept lawn and were now gathered around a tall, slender, blue-eyed woman who had stepped from the doorway onto the veranda to meet them. Marian was engaged in shaking hands with her as Betty and Ruth joined the group.

"I am very glad to know you, my dear," was Miss Wyndham's greeting as she shook Ruth's hand. "I have heard so much about you that I know we shall be the best of friends."

A swift wave of homesickness smote Ruth as she listened to the soft voice. Although there was no resemblance, something about Miss Wyndham brought a vision of Ruth's own mother before her. "I know I shall love you," she said impulsively.

"Everybody loves Aunt Louise," declared Betty. "That's why I was so determined to have her up here. If she hadn't come of her own free will I'd have felt it my duty to kidnap

her and drag her to the Roost by main force. But as usual she behaved like an angel and came up here, bag and baggage, without a murmur."

"There is nothing like having an untiring press agent," smiled Miss Wyndham. "But the proof of the pudding is in the eating. I may turn out to be a stern tyrant, after all."

"You couldn't be cross if you tried," contradicted Betty loyally.

"Wait and see," was Miss Wyndham's solemn rejoinder, but the twinkle in her blue eyes belied her prediction. "At least I must prove myself hospitable. Ruth and Marian must be very tired after their long journey. Take them to their room, Betty. But where is Emmeline? I understood you to say that she, too, was to be here to-day."

Betty explained that Emmy had insisted on driving the party to the Roost in her car and had returned to the Inn with the automobile. "I wanted to go back with her, but she wouldn't hear of it. She promised to come later. She prefers to keep her car at the Inn garage," finished Betty, frowning slightly. Although Emmy had followed her own inclinations, Betty found it hard to explain her nonarrival in an offhand manner. She

secretly wished that Emmy had not flown in the face of the arrangements she had made for her. It made it appear almost as though Betty herself had been guilty of inhospitality.

Miss Wyndham made no further comment on the missing member of the house-party. Acute of perception, she divined that her niece was not entirely at ease on the subject. "I suppose you two would like to room together." She addressed herself to Ruth and Marian. "There are five sleeping rooms in the cottage. Betty and I share one, Jane and Anne another, Frances and Sarah decline to be separated. That leaves Emmeline a whole room to herself, unless one of you prefers to be alone. However, you three can settle that point when she arrives. Now come inside and Betty will take you upstairs."

From the veranda Miss Wyndham ushered her guests into an attractive hall and on to a spacious living room, the beauty of which caused both Ruth and Marian to cry out with delight. As is the case with many cottages in the Catskills, the walls of the living room were built of spruce, finished in silver birch with the bark out. The beamed ceiling and immense fireplace at one side of the room added immeasurably to the artistic effect.

The polished floor was covered with a particularly beautiful rug in soft grays. A drab leather davenport at one end of the room, piled high with gay silk cushions, lent just the precise amount of coloring to the general effect, while the deep wicker and willow chairs scattered about the room seemed especially designed for comfort.

"It's quite the prettiest room I ever saw," bubbled Ruth, "and I don't believe there is an uncomfortable spot in it."

"There isn't," assured Jane Pellew. "I've tried every last chair and I know whereof I speak."

After duly exclaiming and admiring in the fashion belonging only to girls, Ruth and Marian followed Betty into the hall and up the broad staircase.

"This is your room," announced Betty, throwing open a door at the left of the stairs. "I say 'your room,' but of course when Emmy comes you three can settle things definitely. This room adjoins Auntie's and mine, and the bath is between. I'll leave you girls to your own destruction. Only don't annihilate yourselves completely, for we need you in our happy band. And don't stay away from us too long. We must all be

together as much as we can while we have the chance."

With a gay little nod, Betty vanished, leaving her guests to look about their new habitation. Like the living room, it also evoked much admiration on their part. The same silver birch finishing was in evidence. The rug was of a delicate blue, the furniture in white maple. The white ruffled window curtains of crisp dotted Swiss muslin, together with the deep willow chairs and artistic willow reading stand, made the room as dainty a nest as one could wish.

There were also narrow twin beds, each with its folded quilt of pale blue silk. Marian sat down on one of them with a long sigh of sheer satisfaction. "Isn't this room perfectly sweet?" was her eager question. "I shall love it, I'm sure. I've always wanted a blue room like this."

"It surely is lovely," commented Ruth rather absently. Her mind was not on Marian, although she heard dimly what her cousin was saying. A new and decidedly perplexing problem had risen to confront her. What should she do about Emmy? Undoubtedly, Emmy would feel that she had the best right to be her roommate. Yet it seemed hardly fair to desert Marian. Per-

haps it would be wisest to take Marian into her confidence and inform her of the exact state of affairs. She was so good-natured that Ruth had not the slightest doubt regarding what her answer would be. She would immediately declare that she was quite willing for her cousin to room with Emmy, and unselfishly resign all claim to the pretty room she had so greatly admired. She would no doubt say cheerfully that she didn't in the least mind rooming alone and assure Ruth that her feelings were not hurt. If, when Emmy arrived at the cottage, she found that, after all, she and Ruth were to room together, she would become speedily mollified and the threatening shadow would disappear. But was it quite fair to Marian to ask her to make this sacrifice merely for the sake of pleasing Emmy? Though Marian was at present Betty's guest, first of all she had been hers. She it was who had insisted, in the face of her cousin's refusal, that Marian make one of the house-party. The sacred law of hospitality still bound her to consider Marian's welfare. Ruth suddenly threw back her shoulders with the air of one who has come to a definite decision. When Emmy arrived it was with her, not Marian, she would have that private talk.

CHAPTER VII

A HEART TO HEART TALK

The waning afternoon brought no sign of the return of Emmeline Cerrito. Aside from considerable speculation as to what had happened to detain her, the seven girls spent a happy session together on the veranda, talking over bygone days, their conversation permeated with frequent bursts of carefree laughter. As dinner time approached, however, a vague uneasiness began to make itself manifest among them.

"What do you suppose is keeping Emmy?" asked Frances Bliss at last. There had been a brief lull in the conversation during which each girl had been asking herself the same question.

"That's exactly what I was thinking. Great minds, you know." It was Jane Pellew who spoke.

"She ought to be here by this time. I'm sorry I didn't insist on going back with her." Betty Wyndham looked distinctly worried.

"We might go upstairs, get into our Camp Fire clothes and walk down to meet her." The sug-

gestion came from Ruth. She was deeply concerned over Emmy's continued absence. "I'm glad that Marian and I packed our Camp Fire uniforms in our suit cases. We were going to put them in our trunks, then we decided we wouldn't. We wanted to have them handy in case we needed them in a hurry. When we had them packed there wasn't much room left in our suit cases for anything else. But we managed to jam the rest of our necessary stuff into the traveling bag. Knowing the baggage delivery to be a weird, mysterious institution of many promises and few fulfillments, we proposed to be on the safe side. A Camp Fire suit in time saves lamentation. But how are we to get our trunks, Betty? I can't imagine any delivery man in his sane mind traveling the length of that Pass with a trunk on his shoulders."

"Didn't you hear me telling Emmy that there was another approach to the Roost?" asked Betty.

Ruth shook her head. "No; I didn't," she returned, flushing slightly. She had been so annoyed at the sulky manner in which Emmy was conducting herself that Betty's explanations had not been impressed upon her worried mind.

"Well, I'll tell you about it all over again," smiled Betty. "Our lawn at the back of the Roost

slopes directly down to another highway. We could have come that way this afternoon. It's rather roundabout, though. And it wouldn't have been much use as long as we haven't a garage at the Roost. Besides, the Pass is so interesting. To go through it makes one feel as though one had actually left civilization behind. That back road may be useful, but it's ordinary. The Pass is—well, it's romantic, and I like to keep up the illusion."

"I understand," nodded Ruth. "Half the fun in living in a lovely place like this is to imagine one is really cut off from the rest of the world."

"Imagination isn't one, two, three with reality when it comes to hanging hopefully out the window watching for one's trunk, as I did yesterday. That back road is a glorious institution and ought to be appreciated," declared Jane.

"My back road 'tis of thee,
Whence came my trunk to me,
Of thee I sing!
Road up the mountain side,
Of Wand'rer's Roost the pride,
I would not thee deride
For anything!"

caroled Frances mischievously.

"That's an insult to our national hymn and to Jane. Down with the offender!" Sarah advanced upon Frances, who retreated so hastily that she bumped violently against the porch swing in which Jane sat tranquilly swaying. The unsuspecting victim lurched ungracefully forward, barely saving herself from violent contact with the veranda floor.

"Trying to add injury to insult," was Jane's scathing comment as she regained her balance. "I think I'd better take a hand in punishing the offender. Suppose I had broken my nose?" She fixed a menacing eye on the unlucky Frances, who, regardless of the enormity of her crime, leaned against the porch rail, speechless with laughter.

"Excuse—me—Jane!" she gasped. "I'm awfully sorry!"

"You look sorry," jeered Sarah.

"Truly I am." Frances straightened her face with difficulty. "If you *had* broken your nose, Jane, let this sweet thought console you: I would have picked you up tenderly and wept over you!"

"You mean 'laughed,'" corrected Jane, smiling a little in spite of herself. "Even your tears wouldn't have mended my broken nose."

"All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put Janie's nosey together again!"
murmured Frances sadly.

"What's the use of mourning over what didn't happen?" remarked Anne unsympathetically. "You remind me of Clever Elsie in Grimm's Fairy Tales, Jane. Don't you remember? She sat in the cellar and nearly cried her eyes out because she happened to think that if she had had a son he might have fallen down the cellar stairs and broken his neck."

A chorus of giggles greeted this remark, in which even Jane was obliged to join.

"You are a hard-hearted aggregation," she accused, "and I shan't stay here and be abused. Besides, if we are going out on a hunt for a missing maiden, we'd better be starting."

Betty, who had paused in the doorway, a laughing spectator of Jane's disaster, vanished inside the house to inform her aunt of the proposed expedition, and the others were not slow to follow her, going to their rooms to don official attire.

Fifteen minutes later a bevy of blue-clad foresters, their serviceable serge skirts just meeting their trim, high-laced tan boots, had replaced the group of daintily-dressed girls who had so lately

lounged about the veranda. They had now cast aside the indolent air of leisure which had pervaded the porch party and stood waiting for Betty, alert and eager to take the trail, who soon appeared on the veranda, looking exceedingly trim.

"Don't be late for dinner, girls," called Miss Wyndham after them, as they swung across the lawn toward the Pass.

Reassuring nods and a waving of hands answered her solicitous injunction, then the little company swung around the corner of the bluff where the descent began, to reappear single file down the Pass, which could be plainly seen from the veranda. But their expedition in the cause of the tardy French girl was destined to end almost as soon as it began. They had reached the spot where the Pass ended in the open space at the foot of the hill. It was there that they had left the automobile for the last lap of their journey. From this point the main road stretched away toward Haines Falls. As they came out on the highway the chugging sound of a motorcycle assaulted their ears. Up the road a solitary motorist was bearing down upon them in a great cloud of dust.

As he neared them, Betty gave a quick exclama-

tion of alarm. In him she recognized a man from the Silver Birch Inn garage. "He's from the Inn," she gasped. "Something dreadful must have happened to Emmy! I'm sure he's bound for the Roost with a message."

"Stop him," cried Jane excitedly.

However, the motorcyclist needed no order to stop. The instant he spied the group gathered at one side of the road, he brought up at a full stop in front of them.

"Are any of you young ladies from Mr. Wyndham's cottage?" he asked, respectfully touching his leather cap.

"I am Miss Betty Wyndham." Betty stepped forward, confronting the man. "Have you a message for me?"

"Yes, Miss." Reaching into his coat-pocket the man produced a sealed envelope which he handed to Betty. It bore the French girl's unmistakable chirography. "I was told I needn't wait for an answer, Miss." He turned away as though about to depart.

"Wait a moment," commanded Betty. "*I*, at least, may desire to send an answer to this. Pardon me, girls." She tore open the envelope and, unfolding the sheet of note paper, bearing the let-

terhead of the Silver Birch Inn, scanned the familiar writing with an ever-deepening frown.

"Please say to Miss Cerrito that Miss Wyndham will expect her at Wanderer's Roost to-morrow," she directed the messenger in her most dignified manner. Her companions were taking in the little scene in absolute silence. Nevertheless curiosity looked out from every face.

"Very well, Miss." Again touching his cap the messenger turned to his motorcycle and was soon puffing noisily away from the scene, leaving a trail of dust behind him.

"For goodness sake tell us what has happened," implored Jane Pellew, the moment the man was out of earshot.

Betty faced them, her fine features indicative of deep annoyance. "Really, girls, I feel as though I'd like to give Emmeline Cerrito a good shaking when I see her again. It's too provoking in her. But here. Read this for yourselves and perhaps you'll understand. I'm sure I don't."

Jane's ready hand reached out to receive the proffered sheet of note paper which had occasioned Betty's displeasure. Five heads peered anxiously over her shoulder, regardless of etiquette. Marian alone made no effort to see what

Emmy had written. She stood a little to one side, a peculiar smile flickering about the corners of her good-humored mouth. Since her meeting with Emmeline Cerrito she had seen more than appeared upon the surface.

Jane had begun to read the note aloud.

"DEAR BETTY:

"When I reached the Inn to-day I was greatly surprised on looking on the register to find Blanche Shirly's name. She and her mother are here for the summer. As they were quite anxious for me to dine with them and stay for the hop, I decided to do so. Blanche knows a number of delightful young men who are staying at the hotel, and as I love to dance, I could not resist accepting her invitation. I shall endeavor to come out to the Roost to-morrow afternoon. I am going to take Blanche motoring in the morning. Please present my sincere apologies to your aunt. I would apologize to you, too, but as you have the rest of the girls with you, you won't really miss me.

"Yours hastily,

"EMMELINE CERRITO"

"Well of all things!" burst from Jane Pellew's lips. "Blanche Shirly at the Inn! I had no idea she was in this part of the country!"

"I thought Emmy didn't care much for Blanche," was Sarah Manning's blunt remark. "Don't you remember? She used to give funny imitations of her ridiculous grown-up airs."

"It's quite evident from this note that she's changed her opinion," put in Frances. "One might imagine that she and Blanche were sworn friends."

"Very likely she just made up her mind all of a sudden that she'd like to stay for the hop," suggested Anne Follett quietly. "Emmy's different from the rest of us. She has lived in hotels most of her life and naturally those things appeal to her." Anne made this valiant effort in Emmy's defense solely for Ruth's sake. Ruth had not wished the others to know of the difference between herself and Emmy. Anne felt it incumbent upon her to keep the subject away from dangerous ground. A quick glance at Ruth's troubled face had revealed to her the fact that the former was taking the matter greatly to heart.

"I suppose you are right, Anne." Betty wagged her head gloomily. "Emmy *is* different."

"She'll get tired of Blanche before to-morrow noon," predicted Jane, who had never admired the supercilious Miss Shirly.

"You oughtn't to speak so of Blanche," reproved Anne gravely. "You know, she's a Camp Fire Girl, too."

"History doesn't record her joining," retorted Jane. "She only said she wanted to join last spring. That was because almost everyone else at Miss Belaire's got the Camp Fire fever. She didn't care to be left out."

"Now who is hard-hearted?" laughed Sarah.

"I don't care," sputtered Jane angrily. "After the trouble Ruth went to to get Emmy to join the Camp Fire Girls, it's a shame that Blanche Shirly has to come along and spoil all our fun. You know what a perfect dear Emmy can be if she chooses, but once she fixes her mind on a lot of social stunts she'll stay at that old hotel and not bother to come out here."

"No, she won't." Ruth Garnier broke into the conversation with a sudden confident ring in her voice that commanded attention. "In the first place, Emmy can't stay there alone without a chaperon. Her father and mother wouldn't allow it, and she knows that."

"That's so," agreed Betty. "Emmy said yesterday that her father and mother wouldn't like it if they knew she had stayed alone at the hotel,

even for a day or two. They told her to come straight to the cottage, but she waited for her car and for you."

"Then she will be here to-morrow," said Ruth positively. "If she doesn't come, we'd better go to the Inn in a body and bring her back with us."

"I think it's awfully rude in her to stay there even for one night with those Shirlys, when she had already accepted Betty's invitation," criticized Jane, regardless of Camp Fire ethics.

"Oh, never mind about that, Jane. I understand Emmy and so do you. She doesn't mean to be rude. She's just a person who is ruled by her inclinations. Actresses and singers and geniuses in general are simply brimming over with temperament. It goes with their talent and they can't help it. One has to allow for it. That's just what makes Emmy so fascinating." There was a note of reverence in Betty's voice as she made this generous statement. Her own yearning for a stage career caused her to regard the eccentricities of all artists with extreme leniency. "She will be heard in grand opera some day. Her voice is really wonderful. Then we'll be glad that we even knew her."

"Lots of great artists are just like other people," contested Jane stubbornly. "My father says that temperament is only another word for plain temper. You've as much talent for acting as Emmy has for singing, Betty Wyndham, and you aren't a bit that way."

"I wish I were," Betty sighed. "If I had real temperament, perhaps I could convince father and mother that it was their duty to let me go on the stage. I'm so terribly ordinary and prosaic."

"Why don't you develop one?" suggested Frances, with a mischievous giggle. "You could rant and rave and tear your hair. That might help some. Or you might pretend to be absent-minded and go around wearing your clothes wrong-side out and quoting Shakespeare. There are a lot of other things that geniuses are supposed to do, only I don't remember them just now."

Frances' advice was provocative of wholesale laughter. The idea of stately Betty Wyndham stalking majestically about her home, hair awry, her clothing worn wrong side out, alternately raving and quoting Shakespeare, was a joy to contemplate.

"I can imagine what would happen to me if

I took your advice, Frances," smiled Betty. "I'd be packed off to a sanitarium as hopelessly insane and spend my days there trying to convince my keepers that I wasn't really what I seemed to be."

"Then I take it all back," grinned Frances. "Not for worlds would I influence you thus to blast your young life. Didn't I say that dramatically? Who knows?—I may yet be on the stage myself!"

"It's more likely to be one of those stages that run from the Inn to the station," was Sarah's dampening comment.

"Sarah, my child, you have spoken the truth. I see you know me better than I know myself. I will abandon all thought of a stage career, but I will *not* abandon all thought of dinner. I'm getting very hungry. Lead me back to the Roost, most noble Betty, and feed me well." Frances tottered toward Betty. stretching forth an appealing hand.

"You are a ridiculous girl and deserve to be ostracized from this happy band for making fun of my stage aspirations! Come along. I'll conduct you to the eats." Seizing Frances' hand Betty tucked it under her arm. "We might as

well about face," she added. "Those in favor of dinner please respond by saying 'aye!'"

The response came with a heartiness which showed conclusively that Emmy's failure to appear had not driven away the appetites of six hungry girls.

"What makes you so quiet, Marian?" questioned Ruth, as the party turned their steps toward the Roost. "You never said a single word the whole time we were standing there."

"Ruth," Marian's pleasant face was preternaturally solemn, "I didn't intend to say a word, but—well—I know what the matter is with your friend, Emmeline. She's cross with you on account of me. She doesn't like me. I saw it in her eyes the minute you introduced us. She feels that she has the first right to be with you and I can't blame her. My coming here has been a mistake. The girls have been perfectly sweet to me, and I'd love to stay, but I don't think it would be fair to you. So to-morrow I'm going home. I'll just say to Miss Wyndham that I have found it necessary to go back to Springfield. I'll really go there, you know. You needn't write your mother about it. You can explain to her when you go home. Perhaps I'll come to Burton again, later.

If I don't, you can pack my things and send them to me. I've been thinking it over and it's really the best way."

"Marian Selby!" Ruth stopped short on the narrow trail and faced her cousin. They had fallen a trifle to the rear of the others. "Do you suppose for one minute that I'd allow you to do any such thing? If I did, I'd deserve to be perfectly miserable. I've loved to have you with me and I wouldn't give you up even for Emmy. I can't help telling you that you are right about her, though. She—is—well, she likes to have her own way. Being her roommate makes her feel as though I were a little more to her than the other girls. I've thought this over, too, and I'm sure I'd be wronging Emmy as well as you if I humored her. Sooner or later she'll see her mistake, but until she does—well, you'll oblige me greatly by staying right here with me. If you go home, I'll go, too."

"You are splendid, Ruth." Marian's voice was husky. "I'm so proud to have you for my cousin. I'll stay, because I know you wish me to, and I'm going to try my best to make your friend like me."

The ringing Camp Fire call, issuing from their

companions, who were now some distance ahead of them, broke up the heart to heart talk.

"Come on," urged Ruth. "They're calling us!" Ruth sent her clear voice in an echoing answer up the Pass. "Cheer up, cousin mine, and forget your troubles." Her hand fell affectionately upon Marian's shoulder. "But don't forget that, no matter what happens, you've promised to stick!"

CHAPTER VIII

CHRISTENING THE PASS

If Emmeline Cerrito had imagined that her conspicuous absence from their midst would act as an effectual damper upon the spirits of her associates, she would have been deeply chagrined at the matter-of-fact manner in which the members of the house-party accepted her decision to remain at the Inn. When a number of girls gather together for the express purpose of enjoying themselves, they are not disposed to allow anything short of a tragedy to stand in the way of their pleasure. Youth has a fashion, little short of marvelous, of turning its back upon whatever promises to be disagreeable. It joyfully garners the wheat, leaving the chaff to the mercy of the winds. Once the expedition that had fared forth for the express purpose of meeting a dilatory comrade had been defeated in its object by Emmy herself, it halted no longer to bewail her loss, but turned its attention strictly to the business of enjoyment.

When, after dinner that evening, Betty pro-

posed that the Pass should receive its official christening, it was Ruth alone who mildly suggested that they postpone the event until the following evening. "Emmy will be here, you know," she reminded.

"Why should we trouble ourselves about Emmy?" demanded uncharitable Jane. "She hasn't bothered herself about us."

"Very likely she's hesitationing around the ballroom at the Inn as though she'd never even heard of that glorious band known as the Seven Savage Maidens," shrugged Sarah.

"Seven Savage Maidens, sworn to play no tricks;
One broke her sacred word and then there were six!"

recited Frances with naughty inspiration.

"That's rather hard on Emmy," smiled Anne. "Still—" she hesitated. Even she did not quite agree with Ruth.

"By all means let us have the christening," Ruth hastened to say. The instant objection to her suggestion, coupled with a fleeting shadow of disapproval which she glimpsed in Betty's eyes, though the law of hospitality sealed her lips, influenced Ruth to withdraw her mild proposal in favor of one more pleasing to all.

"Here's where Marian can shine as a poet," proposed Frances. "We ought to have some verses really worthy of the occasion. No ordinary efforts, like mine for instance, will do."

"Inspiration won't come without help," laughed Marian. "I'll collaborate with you, Frances."

"We will give you two distinguished geniuses half an hour to compose an ode," said Betty. "We ought to smash our bottle of grape juice on the rocks before it grows dark. Then we can get the full effect. I'll time you, and if you don't produce something extraordinary in thirty minutes you will lose your reputations as versifiers. On the desk at one end of the living room you'll find pens and paper."

"The shorter the time, the better the deed," flung back the undaunted Frances as she and Marian scuttled to the living room to compose their ode.

Frequent laughter from that vicinity soon informed those on the veranda that genius was in a wondrous merry mood.

"I can prophesy beforehand just how fitting that ode will be," remarked Jane, as Frances' infectious chuckle was borne to her ears.

From time to time Betty consulted her watch judicially. Two minutes before the thirty were up, the collaborators appeared, their faces wreathed with smiles.

"'Tis done, the great transaction's done!" Frances triumphantly waved a sheet of paper over her head.

"Wait until I go for the grape juice." Betty rose and, disappearing into the house, soon returned, a quart bottle of grape juice tucked under one arm.

"Let's march to the Pass in single file," proposed Jane. "We must observe as much ceremony as is befitting this auspicious occasion. Miss Wyndham, you are the guest of honor. As Ruth is our highest rank Camp Fire official she will escort you to the Pass. Offer the lady your arm, Ruth."

Ruth laughingly complied. At Betty's suggestion the guests had not changed their Camp Fire suits before dinner, so a solemn procession of blue-clad girls, single file, except for the gracious figure in white on Ruth's arm, wended its way with due dignity to the edge of the bluff where the last rays of the fast sinking sun touched the rocks with tender glory. Here Betty halted the com-

pany and mounting a good-sized stone prepared to hold forth.

"Ahem!" Betty cleared her throat, adjusted her eyeglasses and declaimed with supreme dignity: "Illustrious followers of the noble Camp Fire and one distinguished aunt, I salute you!"

Sarah Manning snickered faintly at this unexpected form of salutation.

"Silence!" Betty fixed the irreverent Sarah with a stern eye. "We have gathered this evening at this sacred spot to perpetrate a deed which will one day be recorded in the annals of our country's history. We have not come in a spirit of levity." She glared significantly at the offending Sarah, who appeared to be on the verge of unseemly merriment. "We are animated and inspired by a lofty motive, and we are also equipped with a full-sized quart of irreproachable grape juice. It is eminently fitting that even the lowliest object should have a name. What's in a name? More than appears on the surface. It therefore behooves us in the interest of suffering humanity to dignify this object of our united approbation with a handle which shall endure through the ages. Nor will we be satisfied with a common, ordinary appellation at which posterity

may point a finger of scorn. Give us originality or give us death!"

She paused to allow the full effect of her oration to sink in.

"Better that we should leap over the yawning brink and batter our august persons on the cruel rocks below than to cover this beautiful spot with ignominy. But we are saved from such a wretched fate. The light of inspiration burns within our breasts and with the courage that dares to do, rather than to die, we have chosen a name that shall awaken the fervent admiration of the world! But ere we bestow upon this hapless Pass that name at which the universe must awake and applaud, we will listen reverently to an ode composed by two stupendous modern geniuses."

Betty stepped majestically down from her perch and motioned Frances to take her place. By this time the illustrious Camp Fire followers were in a fair way to end the solemn session with untimely shrieks of laughter. Curiosity regarding the ode alone kept them within bounds. Not to be outdone, Frances assumed an attitude of dignity which she was far from feeling and began to read the stupendous effort of genius over which she and Marian had labored and giggled.

"Oh, say! Can you see, toward the head of the Pass,
A long line of maidens so gallantly streaming?
Whose proud heads are erect as they toddle along,
Heroic resolve from their faces now beaming.
Though their shins they may bruise,
And wear out their shoes,
They're bound on a mission that none may abuse,
'Tis the naming committee in majesty brave,
Quite crazy, but harmless, Oh, please let them rave!

"Now they pause to take breath on the towering steep,
They have reached the dread heights without breaking their noses!
Triumphant they stand, an illustrious band,
Assuming most graceful and dignified poses.
For it's really a shame
That the Pass has no name,
To send it along in the annals of fame.
Oh, rescue it now from oblivion's grave!
Success to the namers—in peace let them rave!

"Oh, thus be it ever when names don't go round,
That namers shall rise in a fond aggregation,
And for every lone object a name shall be found,
Approved by a grateful and clamorous nation!
For name it we must;
Our cause it is just,
And that our selection's a wise one, we trust.
Oh, grant that no ill-natured vandal may rave!
Three cheers for the namers! Oh, long may
they wave!"

A shout of mirthful appreciation went up as Frances clambered down from the rock and lined up beside Marian.

"Are we poet laureates, or are we not?" she demanded.

"You are!" came the united response.

"Thank you. Thank you." Frances placed one hand on her heart and made an exaggerated bow. Marian laughingly followed suit.

"You're both a credit to this organization and are hereby appointed chief rhymesters of the realm," declared Betty. "Your poetic effort shall be preserved with the official records of the kingdom of Wanderer's Roost."

"This is more than we expected," murmured

Frances, bowing profoundly. "On with the ceremonies! Bring forth the fateful grape juice!"

"Here it is." Betty held up the bottle. "As Ruth thought of the name for the Pass, it is her privilege to perform the christening act."

"I think *you* ought to christen the Pass, Betty," demurred Ruth.

For answer Betty shoved the bottle of grape juice into Ruth's reluctant hands. "I've only one suggestion to offer," she laughed. "Do try to hit that point of rock down there. Otherwise there will be no grand smash."

"Here goes!" Ruth poised the bottle high above her head. "Beloved friends and fellow Camp Fire devotees," she declaimed in an impressive voice, "be it known to all concerned that I hereby solemnly proclaim and declare this historic spot to be known henceforth and forevermore as 'Lookout Pass'!" With accurate aim she sent the bottle of grape juice hurtling through the air. It struck the rock fairly and with a resounding crash that released its purple contents, effectually baptising the portion of the Pass immediate to its vicinity. A shout of approbation burst forth from the christening party. Ruth's aim had left nothing to be desired.

"Now that we've done our duty as loyal citizens, let's go back to the Roost and celebrate," proposed Betty. "There is plenty of grape juice left, and I know how to put it to good use. Lead the way, Ruth, with our guest of honor. Fall in, children."

"May I help you, Betty?" asked Marian eagerly. "I know how to make grape-juice nectar. It's perfectly delicious." Her recent shyness forgotten, she felt herself to be, at last, one of this merry company of girls. She liked them all and she earnestly hoped they might in time like her.

"Of course you may," was Betty's gracious response. "Let the mob sit on the veranda and lick their lips in expectation, while we descend on the humble kitchen and prepare the festal beverage. I hope it won't be necessary to put a 'Busy' sign on the kitchen door."

"Not unless you keep us waiting too long," stipulated Jane. "In that case we shall feel it our duty to appoint an investigating committee."

Jane's investigating committee was not called upon to serve, however. Fifteen minutes after Betty and Marian vanished kitchenward, they returned, Betty bearing the results of their labor

on a quaint Japanese tray. A united murmur of approbation greeted the sight of the tall glasses filled with a choice concoction of iced grape and orange juice, topped off by the tempting scarlet of bobbing cherries. Marian carried a silver dish of assorted French cakes which were also hailed with delight.

When the tall glasses had been appreciatively drained and Jane and Frances had playfully squabbled over the last cake, Betty carried the empty husks of the feast indoors, returning with a mandolin.

"Let's have a sing," she proposed. "It's an ideal night for lifting up our voices." Seating herself on the steps of the veranda, she began idly strumming the mandolin. Presently, with sure fingers she glided into the prelude of that timeworn favorite, "My Old Kentucky Home," and began softly to sing the pathetic, homely words.

Voice after voice joined her, Anne singing the alto and Marian contributing a sweet high tenor that added immensely to the volume of sweet sound.

"Swanee River," directed Betty briefly, as the last note of the plaintive melody died away, and

immediately began the accompaniment. Song after song followed, broken only by little snatches of discussion pertaining to that which was to be sung next. Even stately Miss Wyndham forgot her years and drifting back to girlhood sang as heartily as her young companions. Several Camp Fire Songs were given with great gusto, and it was after ten o'clock when the impromptu musical ended with the inevitable, "Good Night, Ladies."

"After that I begin to see visions of my little bed," yawned Jane. "Far be it from me to break up the party, but, as our friend Rudyard Kipling beautifully puts it, 'I cannot howl all night and hunt all day.'"

"Perhaps we'd better turn in," said Betty. "Ruth and Marian must be just a little bit tired after their journey."

"I *am* sleepy," confessed Ruth, "but you couldn't drive me to bed while there's a good excuse for lingering out here in the moonlight."

"I love to moon, but, Oh, you bed!" supplemented Frances.

In spite of Ruth's protest against breaking up the veranda party, her frank admission of sleepiness bore immediate fruit, and a bedtime procession of light-hearted girls soon climbed the stairs.

CHAPTER IX

THE GINGERBREAD HOUSE

It seemed to Ruth Garnier as though she had hardly closed her drowsy eyelids when she was awakened by a vigorous tattoo sounded on her door. "Nine o'clock, Ruth!" called Betty.

"Come in, Bettina!" Ruth scrambled out of bed, still blinking at the rush of yellow sunlight that poured cheerily in upon her. "Why—where's Marian?" was her question as Betty entered, looking fresh and trim in her Camp Fire skirt and middy blouse.

"Oh, she's been up and doing for an hour," smiled Betty. "You are last out this morning. Jane and Frances had dire designs on you, but I shooed them off. Now they are downstairs clamoring to be fed. At least, they were loudly lamenting their breakfastless state when I left them to come up here."

"I'll get dressed at once." Ruth reached for her stockings. "At home I'm always up at seven. I'm a sure-enough lazybones this morning."

"It's the mountain air," explained Betty. "At first it makes one awfully sleepy. You'll soon become acclimated. Speaking of Marian, Ruth, I am so glad you brought her. She is a splendid girl. I like her ever so much."

"I am glad of that." Ruth spoke with earnest sincerity. "It was horrid in me to write to you of her as I did. I tried to make up for it in my second letter."

"I know just the way you felt at first," sympathized Betty. "I am sure I should have done the same."

"I told Marian about my feeling as though I didn't want her, but I couldn't tell her about that letter, for fear of making her unhappy."

"She'll never know about it from me," Betty assured Ruth.

Ruth would have liked to ask Betty if she had destroyed the letter which she knew to be unworthy of herself, but courtesy forbade her to do so. She had small doubt, however, that it had long since been reduced to unreadable fragments and consigned to the wastebasket.

"I suppose Emmy will be here to-day," remarked Betty, as Ruth tied the lacings of her rubber-soled tennis shoes and wound her long brown

braid about her head, preparatory to making rather hasty ablutions before going on with her dressing. "Since you and Marian are going to room together, Emmy can have my room. It is so pretty that I wanted the odd girl to have it as a consolation for having to room alone. That's why I decided to go in with Aunt Louise. I hope Emmy will like it. It's a darling room. Done in pink and white. Hurry up and we can take a look at it before breakfast."

Ruth needed no urging. As she vanished into the adjoining bathroom, the sound of running water, followed by a vigorous splashing, proclaimed the fact that she was losing no time. Presently she reappeared, rosy and smiling, and quickly completing her toilet, the two girls set off for a peep at Betty's room. With its creamy, rose-bordered rug, white maple furniture and dainty touches of pink, used to carry out the color scheme, it was even prettier than the blue room which she and Marian were occupying.

"Emmy ought to love this room!" Ruth clasped her hands in admiration. "Don't you wish you could take it with you to Miss Belaire's?"

"I've often wished that," sighed Betty. "I

like it much better than my room at home. It seems a pity that I can spend so short a time in it. I came within a little of not having it at all this summer. With father in New York and mother in Colorado visiting her sister, things looked dubious. I didn't care to go West to visit, and so when I happened to think of having a house-party, mother said I might. Then Miss Drexal couldn't come and I was in despair until Aunt Louise saved the day."

As they reached the dining room, the sound of voices from within revealed the knowledge that Miss Wyndham had come to the rescue of the hungry cottagers.

"We stole a march on you," exulted Sarah Manning as they entered. "Miss Wyndham found us wistfully hanging around the stairway, trying our best not to look hungry, and took pity on us."

"It's all my fault," apologized Ruth. "To-morrow I'll be up with the lark."

"First locate your lark," advised Frances.

"Would you know a lark if you heard one?" inquired Jane.

"Being a Camp Fire girl, I ought to," retorted Ruth.

"That is a direct evasion," arraigned Frances.

"I decline to be interviewed," laughed Ruth, "and I defy the interviewer."

"Then I shall turn my attention to Jane. She loves to be interviewed. Don't you, plain Jane?"

"Not until I've been fed," was that young woman's discouraging reply.

The tempting breakfast, served by a trim maid, put an end to this fruitful discussion, and the breakfasters settled down to the meal with the healthy appetite which youth alone knows.

"What is the pleasure of this organization?" inquired Betty, as, breakfast over, they repaired to the stretch of sloping lawn at the back of the cottage for a sun bath.

"I love the sun," declared Anne Follett. "If I had lived ages ago I'm sure I'd have been a sun worshipper."

"And been offered up as a nice pink and white sacrifice," jeered Frances.

"Oh, I'd have been a sun priestess and thus avoided such little difficulties," returned Anne lazily.

"This would be a lovely morning for a swim," suggested Betty with sudden inspiration. "There's a little pond not far from here that

makes a splendid swimming pool. We can put on our bathing suits here and scurry back to the Roost afterward. The pond is on the other side of that grove."

"I can't swim," mourned Frances Bliss.

"Neither can I," admitted Marian.

"Then it's high time both of you learned," nodded Jane. "I should particularly love to instruct Frances in the first principles of the noble art of swimming."

"Promise not to duck me, then," stipulated Frances, "or I won't set foot in the water."

"I promise." Jane held up her right hand. "Still, you couldn't blame me if I did it accidentally."

"I think I'll stay on the bank and watch the rest of you," decided Frances hastily. "The sight of Jane cavorting in the water might inspire me to verse."

"I haven't the least doubt of it," flung back Jane. "These so-called poets are a lazy lot, anyway."

"Marian, that includes you," grinned Frances. "Save our reputation and annihilate Jane."

"'Birds of a feather,' you know," replied Marian. "I think I'll stay on the bank, too."

"What about Emmy?" reminded Anne. "Suppose she arrives while we are gone?"

"I hadn't thought of that." Betty looked concerned. "Oh, well, we shan't be gone long. If she comes, Aunt Louise will take care of her. I've an extra bathing suit, if anyone wants it."

It developed, however, that the girls who had elected to go swimming were provided with suits, and a little later the bathing party, accompanied by Marian and Frances, wended their way across lots to the swimming pool.

For a time the two distinguished poets amused themselves by standing on the bank and calling out ridiculous directions to the swimmers. But after Marian had narrowly missed falling into the pond, due to a crumbling bit of earth that gave way under her feet, and Frances had dexterously escaped being dragged in by the irate Jane, at whom the major part of her pleasantries were directed, the discomfited bards wandered off disgustedly to seek for quieter and safer adventures.

"I wonder who lives in that mite of a cottage over there?" speculated Frances. They had strolled quite out of sight of the bathers and were skirting the edge of a stump fence that bounded

a stretch of green and steeply sloping pasture. Below and beyond the clearing's farther edge, shaded by a grove of beech trees, so tall that they seemed fairly to overwhelm the little structure set in their midst, the cottage that had attracted Frances' attention looked almost like a playhouse.

"It reminds one of the old witch's gingerbread house in 'Hansel and Gretel,' doesn't it?" mused Marian. "Perhaps if we watch we may see the witch herself."

"I love fairy tales," responded Frances fervently. "I've read Grimm's and Andersen's over and over."

"So have I. All my life I've been disappointed because there aren't really any fairies and demons and witches. That cottage doesn't look as though anyone lived in it." Marian squinted judicially at the dingy brown of the little house.

"Let's go down to it and look in the window," proposed Frances. "If it's empty we could get up a haunted house story to astonish the girls."

"Very likely Betty would give us the laugh for our pains. She must know every landmark in this vicinity. But I don't mind taking a look in the window."

"Come on. We'll see what there is to see." Frances propelled Marian rapidly toward the cottage, her mischievous mind intent on a blood-curdling yarn she was inventing out of whole cloth. She giggled joyfully as she imagined how seriously Jane would receive it. Jane was a firm believer in "ha'nts."

Confident that the object of their speculation was untenanted, the inquisitive explorers advanced boldly upon it. Halting before one of the blurred, narrow-paned windows, across which a spider had painstakingly woven its web, they peered curiously in.

"Nothing but a few old sticks of furniture and a lot of dust!" exclaimed Frances disgustedly. "No self-respecting witch would think of —"

The sudden pressure of a heavy hand on her shoulder caused her to wheel about with a cry of alarm. Marian was only the fraction of a second behind her. The two girls found themselves staring into a pair of wild black eyes that might easily have belonged to the fabled witch of the gingerbread house.

"Why you luke in my weendow?" demanded a fierce voice. The grip on Frances' shoulder tightened.

Frances' brief consternation changed to anger. Exerting all her strength, she twisted herself free of the gripping fingers. "I beg your pardon," she said haughtily. "We did not think that anyone lived here." Despite her brave front, Frances experienced a thrill of positive terror as she confronted this strange apparition of broad daylight which had crept soundlessly upon them. She saw before her a tall, broad-shouldered woman of perhaps forty years, whose heavy black hair, straggling low on her forehead, accentuated the ferocious gleam of her large, dark eyes, looking out from under heavy, scowling brows.

The woman gave a short savage laugh. "Lies, all lies!" she exclaimed fiercely.

A tide of angry color rose to Frances' cheeks. "We are not in the habit of saying what is not true," was her stiff retort. "I repeat, we did not think that this cottage was occupied."

There was an ominous silence, during which the woman continued to regard the trespassers with sullen unbelief. "W'ere you leeve?" she asked shortly.

"I hardly think that concerns you," broke in Marian quietly, a touch of defiance in her even tones. She was equally incensed at the attack

upon Frances' veracity. She now eyed the traducer unflinchingly.

Her calm manner served only to enrage the already angry questioner. "You spies!" she hissed. "You try to—"

"Why should we wish to spy upon you?" cut in Marian sharply. "We are not in the least interested in you, nor do we wish to pry into your affairs. We will go—"

"Yes; you go!" interrupted the woman menacingly. "You come again, you be sorry!"

"One call is enough, thank you," Frances assured her with sarcastic emphasis. "Please accept our most humble apologies for so rudely disturbing you. Come on, Marian." Outwardly unruffled, Frances was by no means tranquil in mind. The woman might easily be an escaped lunatic. If so, a quick retreat was decidedly in order.

"You go!" The woman raised her long arms as though to shoo them off the premises they had so innocently invaded. "You—"

A shrill wail uttered in an unmistakably childish voice caused the woman to whirl about as if electrified. Without so much as a backward glance, she sped toward the cottage, leaving the intruders to stare blankly after her.

CHAPTER X

THE HIKE TO SUNSET ROCK

"That sounded like the cry of a child." Marian regarded Frances with growing consternation. "What ought we to do?"

"What *can* we do?" Frances made a despairing gesture. "The woman is on her own premises you know. It is we who are trespassers. She may be the mother of half a dozen children, all tucked away in that gingerbread house. Frankly, I thought she might be an escaped lunatic, but the fact that there is a child, or perhaps more than one, in the cottage, would seem to indicate that she's just hateful."

"We'd better go on about our business, I guess," concluded Marian wisely. "The girls will wonder what has become of us. Betty may know the answer to all this."

It took them at least twenty minutes of brisk walking to reach the swimming pool, only to find it deserted. A line of familiar figures, climbing the slope behind the Roost, sent them hurrying after in a vain effort to catch up with their friends.

"We may as well take our time," grumbled Frances. They were still the length of a field from the Roost, into which the last member of the swimming party was just disappearing. "I had thought up a hair-raising 'ha'nt' story for Jane's special benefit, and now my fun is spoiled."

"We could have a ghost party, anyhow," planned Marian. "Wait until some fine evening when it's good and dark and the girls are all sitting around on the veranda. You and I will dress up in sheets and appear suddenly in their midst. Then you can tell your ghost story."

"That will be fine," glowed Frances. "If I can manage to lay hold of a pair of stilts, it will certainly add to the effect."

A shrill halloo from Jane's window interrupted further planning. Jane had draped herself across the window sill and leaning far out was making frantic signals to them to hurry. "Get a move on, you slowpokes," she called. "We are going on a picnic hike to Sunset Rock and we can't wait all day for two lagging, languishing, lackadaisical poets!"

"So glad you told us." Frances paused under the window and beamed up at Jane. "Thank you for them kind words."

"You're welcome. Hurry up!" Jane disappeared from the window with a promptness that cut off a further exchange of repartee.

"Why, where's plain Jane?" demanded Frances in pretended amazement when, half an hour later, the swimming party gathered on the veranda for the start. They were now attired in their Camp Fire suits, with the exception of the regulation blouses, which they had discarded in favor of the cooler middy blouse. As Marian and Frances had no preparations to make, they had calmly seated themselves in the big porch swing to await the others.

"She'll be here in a minute. She broke her shoe lace," informed Anne.

Frances received this news with a joyous chuckle. Slipping out of the porch swing she darted into the house and took up her position at the foot of the stairs.

"Get a move on," she ordered jubilantly, as Jane appeared at the head of the stairway. "We are going on a picnic hike to Sunset Rock and we can't wait all day for a poking, provoking, prosaic, procrastinating Pellew person!"

"You stole that out of the Thesaurus," accused Jane as she descended.

"Never! I haven't seen one for months. Your mind is wandering. Not one of those endearing terms is synonymous. Besides, I defy you to find 'Pellew' in any Thesaurus that was ever put together."

"What's happening here?" Attracted by the sound of voices, Sarah Manning poked her head in the doorway. "I might have known!" She assumed an expression of deep boredom and disappeared, leaving the talkative pair to continue their argument. Their immediate appearance on the veranda, arm in arm, seemed a patent indication that some sort of truce had been declared.

"'What are we waiting for, oh, my heart?'" trilled Anne, as Betty mumbled something about wishing someone would hurry.

"For the eats, of course. What is a hike without eats? It's almost noon now and it will be after two before we reach the end of our climb. Our cook is packing the luncheon in two small hampers. We'll have to take turns carrying them. At last!" Betty breathed relief as Mary, the maid, appeared, a well-filled basket in each hand.

An animated discussion arose regarding the disposal of the hampers, and the procession finally set off with one of the precious baskets swing-

ing between Betty and Ruth, while Frances and Marian, who were becoming hourly more chummy, were entrusted with the care of the other. From the moment of their tardy return to the Roost matters had proceeded at such a lively rate that there had been no opportunity for either girl to question Betty regarding the dingy brown cottage and its mysterious occupants. They discussed this as they tramped along and at Marian's suggestion it was agreed between them that the recital of their curious adventure should be saved until luncheon time.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Frances, with a little start of recollection, "I wonder if Betty forgot about Emmy?"

"Didn't you hear her telling the girls that Emmy telephoned, while we were at the swimming pool, that she wouldn't be with us until late tomorrow afternoon?" asked Marian.

"No. Where was I that I missed that? Oh, I know. It must have been when I was hanging about the stairway waiting to get even with Jane. What's come over Emmy, I wonder? She has always had her queer moods, but I never before knew her to be quite so aggravating."

Marian might easily have shed light on the

"I never even dreamed it would be like this."

subject. Instead, she held her peace, managing to direct the conversation into other channels.

The climb up the steeps to Sunset Rock proved itself to be a hike indeed, and it was considerably past two o'clock when, with sparkling eyes and flushed faces, the Camp Fire Girls gained the welcome bit of table land from which they were able to descend to the flat surface of the great Rock itself, where it jutted from the cliff. But the effort had been well worth while, for the magnificent view obtainable only from such heights, burst upon them in its full glory, rendering them speechless with sheer wonder and admiration.

"I never even dreamed it would be like this." It was Anne who broke the hush that had fallen upon the merry company. Her small hands were clasped in worshipful rapture, as her brown eyes drank in the supreme grandeur of the blue and purple hills which seemed to print their bold outlines against the cloudless sky. It was an unusually clear day, and there was no suspicion of mist to hide the long perspective of the valley below, and far beyond where that perspective opened out to the flat plain, a thread-like gleam of blue that was the Hudson, flowing beneath the long level line of the Palisades.

"'To him who in the love of Nature holds
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
A various language,'"

quoted Ruth softly. An ardent worshiper of the great outdoors, she could think of nothing more fitting to express the emotion that welled within her.

"Bryant certainly knew what he was talking about," declared matter-of-fact Jane, wagging her head with vigorous emphasis. "No wonder he was called the 'Nature Poet.'" Her sharp black eyes were glowing with eager appreciation.

"He must have lived very close to the heart of outdoors, or he couldn't have written so wonderfully," was Betty's tribute.

"Poets are supposed to see marvelous things to which mere ordinary mortals are blind," said Sarah sentimentally.

"Some poets never see anything except a chance to ridicule their friends," retorted Jane pointedly, her recent Nature worship falling away before this splendid opportunity to direct a shot at purely local bards. It was too good to be lost.

This unexpected leap from the heights on Jane's part brought reverent communion with Nature's visible forms to an untimely end.

"Just depend upon plain Jane to bring us back to earth with a jolt," commented Frances disgustedly. "I defy anyone to commune with Nature when she's on the scene. I had just composed two whole lines of real worth, when she interrupted my train of thought."

"Let's hear you say them," challenged Jane.

"I can't remember them," confessed Frances. "Your brutal attack upon Marian and me drove them out of my mind."

"I merely said 'some poets.' I didn't mention names. If the coat had been a misfit you wouldn't have put it on in such a hurry."

"You girls remind me of Tennyson's 'Brooklet.' It went on forever, you know," insinuated Sarah with her ever-ready giggle.

"I feel as though I'd been going on forever without anything to eat," remarked Betty plaintively. "Since Nature worship has been reduced to revelry, we might as well crown the outrage by having luncheon."

"I am with you, noble sister," agreed Frances with unabashed alacrity. "Bring forth the eats."

"You're responsible for one half of them," slyly reminded Ruth.

"Here they are, right side up with care."

Frances sprang for the hamper which she had deposited on the ground within convenient reach, and handed it to Betty with a flourish.

"Don't imagine for a minute that we are going to have luncheon here," announced Betty. "One careless backward step would end someone's promising career. I know a better and a decidedly safer place than this."

Following Betty's lead they retraced their steps past an enormous white hotel and into the natural woods beyond, where presently they came into a pleasant little dell, ideally suited to the needs of picnickers.

From her hamper Betty then brought forth a tablecloth, paper napkins and several collapsible drinking cups. Dainty sandwiches, composed of chicken, olives, cheese and ham, followed them. "Get busy and unpack your hamper," she directed. Frances obeyed. Soon a goodly array of the various toothsome comestibles best calculated to meet the approval of seven hungry Camp Fire Girls was set out on the snowy cloth. Betty had laid it on a large flat rock which served admirably for a table. The girls needed no second invitation to the feast. Seating themselves Turk fashion about the rock, they devoted themselves

strictly to the business of eating, to a running accompaniment of merry talk, punctuated by frequent bursts of laughter.

"Some spread!" lauded Sarah as she helped herself to a particularly delectable chocolate-covered cake. "This is positively my last. I couldn't eat another mouthful even to please Jane."

"The less there is for you, the more there is for me," parried Jane. "I have dark designs on those cakes, too."

"Eat them all, girls," urged Betty. "We don't want any excess baggage going home."

"Betty," began Frances with an abruptness that shattered the indolent attitude of relaxation into which the picnickers had fallen after their meal, "who lives in that lonely scrap of a cottage, away over the other side of the swimming pool? You must know the one I mean. It's painted, or rather it was once painted, brown, and it's completely hedged in by tall beech trees."

Betty flashed a somewhat startled glance at Frances. Then she laughed. "Now I know where you and Marian went this morning. You were poking around the haunted cottage."

"Haunted cottage!" was the united cry.

Betty nodded. "Yes, we're supposed to have a ghost in our vicinity. It's really all nonsense. A long while back, so the story goes, a man and his wife lived there. Then the woman disappeared mysteriously. The husband had been very cruel to her and had made threats against her life. The authorities took up the case and the man was accused of being responsible for her disappearance. He was arrested, but they couldn't prove a thing against him. So they let him go. He went back to the cottage and lived there for a while. Then one night a farmer met him running down the road, raving and shouting that his wife had come back to haunt him. He was crazy, of course, and was put in an insane asylum. But the country people declared that the house *is* haunted and that late at night a tall white figure sometimes comes out of the cottage and walks in and out among the trees, wringing its hands and moaning. It's just a silly story. No one has ever been found who actually *saw* the ghost. It's one of those spooky tales that start from nothing and keep on going. But nobody cares to live there, so it's been empty for ages," finished Betty, shrugging her shoulders in contempt for the superstitious story.

Frances and Marian exchanged significant glances.

"Humph!" ejaculated Frances. "We saw a very lively ghost there this morning. Didn't we, Marian?"

"What do you mean?"

Frances plunged into a vivid account of their morning adventure, turning occasionally to Marian for corroboration.

"That's the queerest thing I ever heard." Amazement stared from Betty's eyes.

"Too queer to be fact," asserted Jane meaningly. "You must have fallen asleep by the roadside and dreamed it, Frances."

"My dear Jane, I *may* have my faults, but I solemnly assure you that, in this instance, George Washington and I are one. I forgive you, Jane, but I am deeply hurt." Frances' wide smile scarcely indicated a mortal wound to her feelings. Her face suddenly sobering, she said: "The only part of the whole affair that bothered me was hearing that child cry."

"The woman must have been the child's mother, though," argued Betty. "The very fact that she ran off and left you when she heard it cry, would seem to prove that."

"If you had seen her you would understand why we felt worried," broke in Marian, shuddering slightly as she recalled the stranger's fierce, hard face and savage manner.

"When we get back to the Roost, I'll make it my business to find out who she is and all about her," promised Betty. "I don't know who owns the cottage, but I can inquire. Whoever this woman may be, it's certain she doesn't believe in ghosts. Quite likely we shall learn that she is some very poor person with half a dozen children who has been able to rent the cottage for almost nothing. It has been vacant so long that no doubt the owner was willing to rent it for a song."

Betty's prosaic supposition concerning the mysterious tenant of the haunted cottage served, in a measure, to lessen the excitement which Frances' tale had aroused. Even Frances herself admitted rather sheepishly that they might have been making a mountain of a mole hill. But, although she made no comment, Marian was not of that opinion. She was a keen observer, and, for her years, possessed considerable insight into human nature.

CHAPTER XI

AN EMBARRASSING MOMENT

The morning after the hike to Sunset Rock found the house-party awake in good season but scarcely in the mood for stirring deeds. Although no one would confess to being in the least tired after yesterday's strenuous climb, a slight reaction had set in. Anne's proposal that they spend the day at home, devoting it to reading, writing letters, or similar pastimes that would call for no great amount of physical effort, met with no dissenting voice. At Betty's earnest solicitation "not to bother to dress up for breakfast," kimonos and negligees had been strictly in order that morning. In their bright-hued, half-fitted gowns of soft silk the girls made a pretty picture as they lounged about the living room.

"I'm going to shampoo my hair," announced Betty Wyndham with a sudden access of energy, as she rose from the deep-seated leather chair in which she had been indolently reclining, and sauntered toward the living room door. "Anyone care to join me?"

"I believe I will." Anne laid down her magazine and strolled after Betty. "It won't take long to dry it. The sunshine is glorious."

"We'll sit on that rustic bench in the back yard and get the full effect of the sun," declared Betty.

"Jane and I will hang out the window and sing 'The Lorelei,'" promised Frances. "It will be a splendid chance to find out if Anne's hair is really her own. She says it is, but—"

"I won't engage in any such prying enterprise," flatly refused Jane. "I'm going to write to my father and I warn you not to disturb me, Frances Bliss."

"'Assume a virtue if you have it not,'" jeered Frances. "Now, to continue my discourse on the subject of Anne's hair. She says it is, but—" Frances appeared to quail beneath Jane's withering eye, "—we all know it without having to be told!"

"*You* are a quitter," accused Jane with fine scorn. "That is *not* what you intended to say."

"What else could I possibly say?" Frances looked the picture of bland innocence. "It pains me to believe, Jane, that *you* are harboring unjust suspicions against Anne."

"It pains *me* to listen to such nonsense," flung

back Jane. "If I were you, Anne, I'd demand an explanation."

Anne and Betty had lingered in the doorway to listen. Engaged in energetic argument, Jane and Frances were highly diverting.

"That would only complicate matters and delay operations," laughed Anne. "Secure in the knowledge that I am what I seem, even to my much-maligned tresses, I can afford to overlook the rude insinuations of certain malicious persons whose names I am too polite to mention." With this parting shot Anne and Betty disappeared from sight to begin their self-imposed task.

"That's us," chuckled Frances with a fine disregard for English.

"Speak for yourself." Jane declined to rise to the bait. Ignoring her opponent's hopeful eye she marched from the room and up the stairs to write her letter, leaving Frances to mourn her departure in loud and emphatic tones.

"Do be quiet, Frances," implored Sarah. "How can one read when you keep up such a frightful din?"

"I'm merely mourning for Jane," defended Frances. "Now that she's gone, I have lost my chief source of amusement."

"Haven't you any letters that need answering?" was Sarah's innocent inquiry.

"I have, but they won't be answered to-day. You can't get rid of me by that method. However, I am nothing if not agreeable. I will, therefore, remove my noisy presence and leave you in peace. I'm going upstairs to effect a much-needed reform. I am about to begin a busy little session with my trunk. I haven't been able to find a thing that I wanted, when I wanted it, since I came." Frances departed on her crusade of order, while the three remaining occupants thankfully congratulated themselves on the prospect of a quiet hour.

Meanwhile Betty and Anne had repaired to the bathroom, shampooed their respective brown and golden locks to their own satisfaction, and had betaken themselves to a rustic bench at the foot of the lawn behind the Roost, there to allow the warm sunshine and gently stirring breezes to do their perfect work. Their faces turned toward the house, their long hair streaming out behind them, the two girls conversed in low, absorbed tones. Intent upon their own affairs they gave no heed to the chugging sound of a motor car that was being driven rapidly in the direction

of the Roost. It was not until the murmur of feminine voices, supplemented by deeper, masculine tones, assailed their ears, that the pair awoke to the knowledge that unexpected visitors were about to descend upon them.

"Oh!" Betty sprang to her feet in alarm, gave one despairing glance at the approaching callers and set off on a run for the house, an animated flash of blue on the peaceful landscape. Anne, too, displayed remarkable sprinting powers, her long golden hair and green silk draperies fluttering a signal of dismay as she gained the shelter of the Roost. The open door of the stairway revealed to her the way Betty had taken. Anne prepared to follow her, then remembering the kimono-clad company they had left lounging in the living room, she dashed to their rescue.

"Hurry upstairs and make yourself presentable, girls!" she exclaimed. "Emmy has arrived at last with Blanche Shirly, her mother and two young men!"

The reading circle broke up in a wild rush for the stairs.

"Can you beat that?" demanded Sarah slangily, as she mounted the stairs at Ruth's heels.

It was left to Frances to do the honors, how-

ever. On going to her room she had proceeded to dress for the day, before overhauling her trunk. At the sound of rushing feet on the stairs she had desisted from her labor long enough to peer curiously out into the hall.

At sight of her, voices were lifted in relieved acclamation. In her dainty gown of pink linen with its wide lace collar and cuffs, Frances, at least, was prepared for all comers.

"Go down stairs, Frances, and make yourself useful," begged Anne. "You are sufficiently ornamental. Emmy's here with the Shirlys and two young men. Never again, even in this sequestered spot, shall anyone persuade me to appear outside my room negligee. They nearly caught Betty and me. We had to run for our lives." She glanced toward Betty's closed door, where the latter was performing a lightning-change dressing feat that would have inspired envy in the breast of a vaudeville artist. Unluckily for her, Miss Wyndham had accepted an invitation to go motoring with a party of friends and had departed directly after breakfast.

"Anything to be obliging." Frances threw up her hands with a gesture of resignation and hurried downstairs to receive the guests, who, hav-

ing witnessed the wholesale flight of the two gayly-garbed figures on the bench, had now paused on the lawn to await developments.

"Good morning, Emmy," greeted Frances, hastening toward the group. "How do you do, Blanche? We were surprised to hear that you had come up to the Catskills." She extended her hand to the latter, who gave her the tips of her fingers. Attired in a smart frock of natural pongee, elaborately trimmed with heavy, expensive lace insertion, her auburn hair tortured into an extreme coiffure of ultra-modern fashion, Blanche Shirly looked far older than her years.

"How are you?" she drawled languidly. "This is my mother, Miss Bliss." She then presented the two young men, Mr. Darwood and Mr. Holt, to Frances. "It was such a beautiful day for motoring, and Emmy was so insistent upon our accompanying her, that we decided to pay Betty a call. I hope we haven't intruded." Her tone did not indicate special regret for the intrusion.

"Betty will be with you in a moment," Frances made answer. She was too honest by nature to protest that the arrival of these unexpected callers was a matter for great rejoicing. Neither did she feel called upon to allude to Betty's precipi-

tate flight. She could not help thinking, however, as her eyes rested on the dumpy, overdressed Mrs. Shirly, with her pale blue eyes and florid, arrogant face, that Blanche came honestly by the snobbishness which had made her so unpopular while at Miss Belaire's. As for the two young men, they were of the well-dressed, vacant-faced type that is always to be found at summer hotels where money outweighs intrinsic worth.

"Betty expected me this morning, did she not?" inquired Emmeline Cerrito with barbed sweetness. Outwardly suave and smiling, Emmy was furious within at the reception accorded herself and her friends. The fact that she had taken the liberty of bringing them with her, had arrived unannounced and from a direction on which her hostess had not reckoned, mattered little to her. What did matter, however, was the lack of ceremony which attended her arrival. Embued with a sense of her own importance, she had delayed her appearance at the Roost for the express purpose of showing the members of the house-party that she was indispensable to its happiness. It angered her to find at least two of them placidly going about their own affairs. No doubt the others were too busily engaged to trouble themselves about

her. Ruth, in particular, might have exerted herself to keep a lookout. It was quite probable that Marian was absorbing *her* attention. These dark thoughts surged through Emmy's brain as she asked the question, solely with a view toward belittling Betty in the eyes of the callers.

"I understood Betty to say that you would be here later in the day." Frances' voice was coolly polite. She did not relish the reproach against her hostess which Emmy's bland question implied. "Here she comes now." Frances looked slightly relieved. Stately Betty could be relied upon to manage her own affairs without assistance.

In her crisp white gown, her lately-flowing hair smoothly coiffed, eye-glasses at their proper angle, Betty was the acme of dignity as she came gracefully forward to receive her guests. Greetings and introductions over, she conducted her visitors around one side of the house to the veranda, apologizing to them now for her aunt's absence with a self-possession quite admirable in one who had so recently been put to flight by their approach. The remaining girls of the house-party, irreproachably gowned, soon appeared on the veranda, but in spite of the sedulous effort they put forth to be polite, a spirit of levity lurked underneath

that was ready to break forth at the first chance word. While upstairs, Anne had described to them the mad dash for the house which she and Betty had been obliged to make, and the memory of it lingered.

Despite her air of gracious self-possession, Betty was dubious regarding the advisability of offering an excuse for herself and Anne. She wondered what her callers might think if she made no reference to their flight. She was equally certain, however, that her first words would result in evoking a riot of laughter from her chums which would be disconcerting, to say the least. She decided that discretion lay in silence, so far as certain things were concerned, and proceeded to adhere strictly to safe and impersonal topics of conversation.

Her endeavor to play the perfect hostess did not meet with the most gratifying results. Blanche, who at school had evinced a decided preference for masculine society, was too deeply engaged in absorbing the attention of the dark-haired young man, Mr. Darwood, to interest herself in her school friends. The other young man had eyes for no one except Emmy, who encouraged his pronounced devotion out of pure perversity. She knew that

Ruth disliked anything bordering on sentimentality and therefore set out to annoy her. The burden of the conversation was, therefore, directed to Mrs. Shirly, who was interested in little outside of the social life at Haines Falls, and who expressed a candid disapproval of an organization such as the Camp Fire Girls, which, according to her views, encouraged its members to run wild and indulge in all sorts of hoydenish pastimes. Blanche had been quite enthusiastic over it when she came home from school, but she had now, very sensibly, discarded all idea of joining.

Altogether, it was a most uncomfortable session that the hitherto congenial house-party spent on the veranda and no one was sorry when the callers signified that they must return to the Inn.

"I hope you have come to stay, Emmy," said Betty cordially as the visitors rose to depart.

Emmy's unfathomable dark eyes rested for an instant on Ruth. Something in the latter's frank gaze caused her to color slightly. She knew she was behaving in a manner unworthy of the better self that a year's association with Ruth had brought to life and developed. Acting on a swift impulse of contrition she replied, "Yes, I am going to stay. I can telephone for my trunk."

"But you told *us* you were going back," broke in Blanche Shirly, her eyebrows lifting in displeased surprise.

"I have changed my mind." An expression of willfulness touched Emmy's red lips that Blanche had come to learn, even in the past two days, was not to be opposed. To contest it would entail a decided loss of smug dignity on her part, and in the end she would not win her point. "Mr. Holt will drive my car back. Won't you, Mr. Holt?"

"I shall be delighted," smirked the young man. Nevertheless, he looked rather blank at this sudden dismissal. "But we shall miss *you.*" He cast a languishing glance at Emmy which caused Frances to pinch the unoffending Jane, who stood beside her. May it be said to Jane's credit that she made no outcry. She mentally registered a long black mark against her tormentor, resolving to return the pinch with interest at the earliest opportunity.

Emmy made no rejoinder to this remark beyond a quick shrug of her graceful shoulders. With that lightning change of mood which so characterized her, she appeared to lose interest in the return party. Accompanied by Betty she saw them to

the automobile and watched them drive off as though almost impatient to behold the last of them.

"I'm glad they have gone," was her calm statement, as she viewed the rapidly disappearing automobile. "They were determined to come," she added almost apologetically. To Betty's amazement, her beautiful, moody face broke into smiles. They had turned to go back to the Roost and were passing the rustic seat of disaster. "Betty Wyndham, as long as I live I'll never forget the way you and Anne galloped across that lawn in your kimonos, your hair flying out behind you. It was too funny for words." Emmy sat down on the seat and rocked to and fro with mirth. Her recent ill humor had mysteriously taken wing.

"I was afraid you'd be angry, Emmy," apologized Betty, "and I didn't dare mention our dash to cover out there on the veranda, for fear of raising a laugh and offending the Shirlys and your friends. You know how the girls act when anything strikes them as funny."

"I know." Emmy ceased to laugh and was strangely silent for a moment. It had come to her forcibly that after all she preferred the company of these light-hearted girls to the society of anyone else whom she knew.

CHAPTER XII

AN INNOCENT TROUBLE MAKER

It was an agreeable surprise to the girls who had chosen to remain on the veranda, rather than accompany the departing guests to the automobile, to hear Emmy's musical laugh ring out as she and Betty strolled into view from around the corner of the house. Courtesy not demanding it, they had been wholly content to cut their polite farewells to the callers as short as possible. Even sweet-tempered Ruth had been slightly ruffled at Emmy's provoking manner. She knew it had been assumed especially to annoy her. She reflected resentfully that she wouldn't care much if Emmy should decide to go back to the Inn. Emmy's altered demeanor, however, was another matter. At the first sound of her laughing voice, Ruth felt the old liking for her roommate sweep over her with a rush.

"Come and sit in the swing with me, Emmy," she smilingly invited, patting the vacant space beside her.

Emmy obeyed without the slightest show of hes-

itation. Her bored manner had vanished, and her changeful face was lighted with an expression of smiling good humor.

"It's great to be here," she said, slipping her arm through Ruth's. "I am glad I didn't go back with the Shirlys."

"I am glad you didn't, too," was Ruth's hearty response, and she really meant it. She experienced an inward qualm of conscience for her brief resentment against Emmy.

"What have you been doing since you came up here?" inquired Emmy curiously.

Ruth responded to her question with a voluble account of all that had befallen the house-party since her arrival at Wanderer's Roost. "You will love Betty's aunt, Miss Wyndham," she predicted. "She is the very nicest sort of person to chaperon a house-party. We have planned to take hikes to a lot of interesting places around here that Betty knows about. Now that you are really here at last, there will be no odd girl. We can hike in couples."

"Then I choose you for my partner," returned Emmy quickly. Her dark eyes strayed for an instant toward Marian, who was engaged in laughing discussion with Jane and Frances.

Ruth nodded smilingly, though she noted the glance and divined Emmy's thought. She hoped that with the return of her roommate's good humor, her brief jealousy of Marian had vanished, not to obtrude itself again.

Yielding to the fascination which when in a gracious mood Emmy could always exert over them, the girls gathered around her, plying her with good-natured questions about herself and the Shirlys. Always in her element when the center of attraction, she soon had them laughing over a ridiculous imitation of the irate Mrs. Shirly trying to arouse the sleepy and slothful Blanche to action, on the morning after the hop, before the breakfast room closed.

"I suppose it isn't quite fair to laugh behind the backs of one's callers," apologized Betty, "but really, I can't help it."

"It's just as fair to do that as it was for Mrs. Shirly to speak so slightingly of the Camp Fire Girls," contested Jane stoutly. "Thanks to her mother, Blanche seems to have laid aside all notion of joining. When we left school she was crazy to be one of us."

"Blanche is too busy with thinking about clothes and dances and men to be a helpful addi-

tion to the Camp Fire movement." Emmy shrugged her shoulders. Now that she had again come into her own she was ready to consign the frivolous Blanche to oblivion and proceed to something that savored of greater interest. The two days spent in the Shirly's society had been of small profit to her, so far as genuine amusement was concerned.

"I am sorry for Blanche." Ruth spoke soberly. "It isn't really her fault that she thinks of nothing but clothes and beaux. It's—" Ruth paused. She hardly liked to lay the blame for Blanche's frivolity at Mrs. Shirly's door. To Ruth the very name of "mother" was sacred. "It's—well—it's the way she has been brought up."

"Oh, let's not talk of Blanche!" Emmy did not propose that the conversation should take a serious turn. "Tell me some more about the Seven Savage Maidens and their glorious works."

"It is a case of Eight Savage Maidens now," corrected Frances. "Marian has joined the ranks."

"Oh!" Emmy's dark eyebrows lifted themselves. "I beg your pardon. I really forgot Miss—" She paused as though making an effort to remember Marian's surname.

"Selby," returned Marian quietly. "But won't you please call me Marian? I should hate to be 'Miss' to Ruth's dearest friend."

Emmy had the grace to flush slightly at this gentle attempt at friendliness on the part of the girl to whom she had half intended to be rude. Her better nature conquering, she held out her hand impulsively. "Of course I will call you Marian. I am glad you asked me."

"We ought to name ourselves all over again," asserted Jane. "I never did care much about calling such a worthy band as ours 'Savage Maidens.' It savors of the Sandwich Islands, or some equally heathenish locality."

"Let's have alliteration," proposed Frances. "I adore alliteration. Let me see. What would go nicely with Eight? Excusable, excitable, exuberant, excruciating, extraordinary — any of those strike your fancy?" She grinned impishly. "Ah! Now I have it! Why not call ourselves 'The Equitable Eight'? That would mean that we are a just and impartial band, devoted to good works and of a calm and steadfast mind."

"'Equitable Eight,'" repeated Anne. "That sounds rather nice."

"I like it, too." Betty nodded approval.

"That settles it." Frances rose from her chair and waved a triumphant hand. "Be it known henceforth and forever that the Seven Savage Maidens have ceased to exist. They have been unceremoniously shoved off the map by the Equitable Eight. Death and disgrace to those who oppose us! That last gentle sentiment is supposed to scare off opposition." She eyed Jane severely.

"You needn't look at me. I wasn't going to oppose it," defended Jane. "I intend to live up to it. I hope certain persons I know will follow my example."

"I hope so," agreed Frances soulfully.

Emmeline Cerrito regarded Jane and Frances with amused eyes. It was really very pleasant to be back in the fold once more. She would telephone for her luggage and have it sent at once to the Roost. "I'm going to phone for my things," she announced, rising with the languid grace which was so characteristic of her. "Don't let me disturb you. Betty will show me to the telephone, won't you, dear?"

"Certainly." Betty rose with alacrity. "Don't you want to see your room, Emmy? It has been waiting patiently for you. You are to have my

room. I am rooming with Aunt Louise. As I said to Ruth when she decided to stay with Marian, it is really the prettiest in the house. It will be a kind of compensation for having to be a single."

Betty's courteous, well-meant explanation met with most astonishing results. Unwittingly she had blundered into the very thing which Ruth had good cause to know would upset Emmy's hitherto gracious humor. In a twinkling the radiance faded from the French girl's beautiful face. Her dark brows drew together in a deep frown and her black eyes flashed signals of rising storm. It was as though a thunder cloud had suddenly obscured a dazzling blue sky. Then as swiftly as it had come, the storm passed. On her red lips flickered a faint smile which might have been construed to mean much or little. It hinted of unspoken things.

"It was awfully kind in you and Ruth to take so much trouble for me," she said with a sweetness that was more disconcerting than a sudden outburst of temper on her part could have possibly been. "I surely appreciate it. I don't in the least mind being a single." Her tone hinted that she preferred it. "I was *so* provoked last year at

Miss Belaire's when I found I couldn't room alone. But that, of course, was before I met *Ruth.* Suppose we telephone for my luggage, at once. Then I can see my wonderful room. I know I shall love it. Be good, girls. I'll see you later." With a careless nod, she followed Betty to the door and disappeared inside.

Marian cast a half imploring glance at Ruth which seemed to say, "I was afraid of this." Ruth, however, sat very erect in the porch swing, an angry gleam in her brown eyes. If Emmy expected that she, Ruth, would hurriedly pursue her with contrite coaxings and apologies, then she would be disappointed. She had fully intended to explain things to Emmy while they sat side by side in the porch swing, but Betty had forestalled her. Now matters might remain as they were. She would not humble herself in an attempt to pacify her difficult friend. If, in the first place, Emmy had not lingered perversely at the Inn with the Shirlys, the question of rooms might have been amicably settled. Emmy, not she, was at fault and although she loved her roommate dearly, Ruth renewed her determination to maintain the stand she had taken, even though it cost her her friendship with Emmeline Cerrito.

CHAPTER XIII

AN INTERESTING FIND

An embarrassing silence fell upon the six remaining occupants of the veranda as Emmy and Betty disappeared. Ruth sat staring doggedly ahead of her. Marian looked distressed; Anne, sorrowful. Jane set her chin at a belligerent angle, while Frances and Sarah exchanged glances of mystified curiosity.

"I think I'll go to my room." Ruth slid from the porch swing and walked into the house, her head defiantly erect. Marian's troubled eyes sought Ruth's retreating back, then she rose and mutely followed her.

"So *that* is the reason Emmy has acted so queerly," burst forth Jane Pellew.

"What do you mean, Jane?" was Frances' sharp question. "Something seems to be in the wind that Sarah and I have missed. Anne looks as though she might be able to explain a few things."

"What do I mean? Just this: I suspected that Emmy was angry with Ruth, the day we went to

the train to meet her. She was crazy to see Ruth, then after Ruth got here, Emmy changed in a twinkling. Don't you remember? She asked me to ride on the front seat with her when we started for the Roost. I thought, then, that I could find out what ailed her, but she didn't give me a chance. Afterward, when she sent that note to Betty, I concluded that she was simply airing her famous temperament. I hadn't changed my mind about her when the Shirlys were here this morning. I didn't wake up until about three minutes ago. Now it's all clear as crystal."

"Sorry I can't agree with you," declared Sarah dryly. "The only part of it that's clear to me is that Emmy is cross because she has to room alone. It's her own fault for staying away. If she had come here in good season, any one of us would have been glad to have her for a roommate."

"It isn't the idea of rooming alone that has upset her," cut in Jane impatiently. "It's because Ruth is rooming with Marian. She expected to have Ruth for her roommate. She's jealous of Ruth's friendship with her cousin. Isn't she, Anne?"

"I am afraid she is," was Anne's grave reply.

"I saw it from the first, but I didn't intend to say anything. Perhaps it is just as well that we all know it now. We can work together to make things right again." She leaned forward in her chair and motioned the girls to draw closer to her.

"What can we do?" demanded Jane rather skeptically. "I can imagine what would happen if we went to Emmy in a body, informed her that we knew she was jealous of Marian and invited her to behave like a reasonable human being."

"We couldn't do that, of course." Anne smiled faintly. She had a mental vision of a disconcerted peace committee fleeing before Emmy's wrath. "But we can simplify matters by pretending not to see that anything unusual has happened. Emmy won't try to enlist sympathy. She isn't that sort of person. Neither will Ruth, nor Marian. We must be strictly neutral and ignore the situation. We had better keep Marian with us as much as possible and leave Ruth and Emmy together. Then they will soon come to an understanding. I can't help saying that Ruth isn't to blame. Still, we are all fond enough of Emmy to wish to see her happy."

"Anne, you are a darling, and here's my hand in token of my admiration!" exclaimed Jane,

presenting her thin brown hand with a flourish. "If we intend truly to be the Equitable Eight we must live up to our name."

"Plain Jane, for once I agree with you. Shake hands with me." Frances possessed herself of Jane's hand and shook it with an energy that brought quick protest from its owner.

"But what about Betty?" propounded Sarah. "We ought to tell her what we've decided to do."

"As hostess she is bound to be neutral," reminded Anne gently. "But if you like, I'll tell her about our plan."

Light had, however, partially dawned upon Betty Wyndham. She stood beside the French girl as she telephoned to Silver Birch Inn for her luggage, a faint frown marring her placid forehead. Should she tactfully inquire into the cause of Emmy's recent displeasure, or should she not? She took it for granted that Emmy was vexed to find that Ruth had not elected to share her room, but she did not then attribute her brief flash of temper to anything deeper than that.

"I think you will like your room, Emmy," was all she said as they turned from the telephone. "It is exactly suited to you."

"Certainly I shall like it." Emmy threw a

graceful arm across Betty's shoulder as, side by side, they mounted the stairs. As she stood at the telephone, her alert mind had reviewed the situation and risen to meet it. She would show Ruth that she could get along very nicely without her. Not by overt act or word did she propose to carry out her plan. She was too clever for that, she told herself. She would simply devote herself to being particularly agreeable to the other girls. She would not slight or shun either Ruth or Marian, but she would build up an intangible barrier between herself and them that would keep them at a distance.

Meanwhile, in their pretty blue room, Marian and Ruth were going over the same ground that they had mentally traversed on the day when Ruth had exacted a promise from her cousin to remain at Wanderer's Roost. Once again, this time in tears, Marian had announced her decision to go home, and, as before, Ruth was earnestly pleading with her to remain. "If you go, then I shall feel it my duty to go with you," she repeated.

"I—don't—know—what I had best do." Marian regarded her cousin with mournful eyes. "Please say that you will stay, even if I decide to leave here," she pleaded. "There were just

seven of you in the first place, and you can get along beautifully without me. Once I have gone, your friend Emmy will feel more at ease."

"You've forgotten that we are now the Equitable Eight," Ruth reminded. "If you go away now, since the girls have come to know and like you, then you will owe them a definite explanation. You wouldn't like to make it, and you simply couldn't offer a false excuse. There is just one thing for us to do: Stay and make the best of it. If Emmy chooses to snub us, and I don't believe she will, then we must meet her discourtesy with unfailing politeness. Two wrongs never made a right, you know. We must be Camp Fire Girls in earnest."

"I know you are right," sighed Marian. "I'm not afraid of being snubbed. It is you I'm thinking of."

"I know it." Ruth laid a caressing hand on Marian's drooping shoulder. "Brace up. This little cloud may pass away soon. Perhaps when Emmy sees her room, she will feel more like her old dear self. It's so pretty, she can't help being cheerful, once she is settled in it. Suppose we go down to the veranda again. The girls will wonder why we left them so suddenly. They may have

a fair idea of things by this time. Unless they mention it to us, we won't say a word. It's always wisest to ignore unpleasant things. Now bathe your face and put a touch of rice powder on it. That will scare the tear stains away."

As the quartette of girls on the veranda had already agreed to do precisely as Ruth had unknowingly counseled her cousin, there was small danger that the tabooed subject would be brought forward. Ruth and Marian reached the veranda just in time to join their friends in a stroll down Lookout Pass. After receiving Betty's assurance that Emmy intended to remain in her room to write to her mother, the party trooped gayly off, an Equitable Seven, at least.

Hearing their blithe voices, Emmeline Cerrito had walked to a window overlooking the lawn, to gaze almost enviously down upon them. A revulsion of feeling swept over her, making her wish she had put aside her pride and joined them. Still it was not a part of her plan to fall in too readily with their projects. The girls must learn to value her and seek her society. She would make herself particularly agreeable at luncheon, merely to show them that she was a person of consequence. After all, it was quite necessary that she should write

her mother, informing her of her arrival at Wanderer's Roost. Knowing that her mother would be displeased to learn that she had not gone directly there from the train, she had determined not to write of it until she was established as a member of the house-party. Once her mother found that she was really there, Emmy knew that she would escape with a mild reproof. Whereas, if she wrote from the Inn, she stood in danger of being ordered to Newport by the first train.

As the last girl disappeared from view, she turned from the window to begin the writing of her letter. An exclamation of impatience burst from her lips. Her luggage was still at the Inn. She had neither stationery nor pens. Her dark eyes wandered to a small white maple desk in one corner of the room. It was closed. Should she try it to ascertain if it were locked? This was Betty's room. Still, Betty had turned it over to her for the time being. No doubt Betty intended the desk for her use.

Crossing the room with the swift, lithe grace that was hers, Emmy tried it. It yielded to her touch, and when open, as is characteristic of the small, ornamental writing desk, the lid formed a writing table. Emmy frowned her disappoint-

ment. There was the usual desk set and plenty of pens, even to a fountain pen, but there was no paper. Raising the lid, her impatient hand sought the drawer underneath. She opened it, emitting a cluck of satisfaction. Here were three sizes of note paper with envelopes to match. Mentally making her selection, she reached for the topmost sheet of paper on one pile. It stuck, necessitating the raising of the entire stack. Her black eyes suddenly became riveted on an open letter underneath, the handwriting of which was decidedly familiar. Hardly conscious of the enormity of her act, she began to read. With a low cry of triumph she snatched the letter from the drawer and read on to the end. When she had finished, an unpleasant laugh broke from her red lips. She had stumbled upon a piece of extremely interesting information.

CHAPTER XIV

A DISQUIETING THOUGHT

When, at a little after one o'clock that day, the house-party gathered in the dining room for luncheon, Emmeline Cerrito's charming face showed no sign of ill-humor. With the gay graciousness of manner that she could assume at will, and which made her so fascinating, she entered with apparent heartiness into the merry flow of conversation that went on at the table. This, in itself, was a matter of distinct relief to her companions. They had half expected her to wrap herself in the cloak of bored languor she was wont to don when displeased, and which inevitably caused them to become constrained and ill at ease in her presence. They were, therefore, only too willing to meet her friendly advances at least halfway, with an eye to avoiding further hitches in their programme of enjoyment.

After luncheon the interrupted session in the living room was resumed. Ruth, Marian, Sarah and Jane settled themselves to the writing of letters. Frances went to her room to finish exploring the

mysteries of her trunk, Betty and Anne soon lost track of the world around them in absorbed reading, while Emmy lolled on the davenport among the gay cushions, ostensibly devoting herself to a volume of Poe's "Weird Tales" which she had picked up from the library table. Every now and then, however, her somber eyes strayed to Marian, who, serenely unconscious of the contemplative scrutiny, was deep in a letter to Mrs. Garnier. It was necessarily a long letter, for Marian was happiest when writing and, to quote her own words, "never knew when to leave off."

As the afternoon advanced Sarah and Jane triumphantly sealed and stamped their epistolary efforts and betook themselves verandaward. Having completed her work of bringing order out of disorder, Frances presently joined them and the sounds of spirited discussion soon informed those in the living room that, outside, entertainment awaited them. Betty and Anne exchanged smiling glances, then resumed their reading. Frequent bursts of laughter from the trio caused interest in literature to decline, and soon they laid aside their books to consort with the illustrious three.

Conscientious to the last degree, Ruth resolutely turned a deaf ear to the enticing murmur

of voices that emanated from the veranda until she had finished her writing. She sighed satisfaction as she folded the result of her industry and prepared it for mailing. Rising, she was about to join the porch party, when it occurred to her that to leave Marian and Emmy alone together might prove awkward for both of them. On second thought she decided that it might be advisable to give them a chance to become accustomed to each other. With a third party always on the scene, there was small possibility of their becoming acquainted. Left to themselves, they might arrive at some degree of understanding which eventually would lead to friendship. With this hope in mind, Ruth slipped quietly from the room.

Deep in her writing, Marian did not raise her eyes from her paper as Ruth made her exit. Emmy, on the contrary, watched her disappear, a curious light in her black eyes. Her gaze next rested speculatively on the brown head bent over the writing table. She opened her lips as though to speak, then seeming to reconsider, fastened her attention once more upon her book. For fifteen minutes silence reigned in the living room. Then suddenly, conscious of the fact that she was being

watched, Marian raised her head, to find the French girl staring fixedly at her.

"You must love to write letters," drawled Emmy.

"I do," responded Marian, with a faint smile.

"I am told that you write verses and stories," pursued Emmy.

Marian felt the hot color rise to her cheeks. There was a hint of skeptical amusement, bordering on insolence, in the soft, drawling voice. It aroused in her a desire to answer the remark in kind. Determined to steer clear of anything that might lead to an open rupture between herself and Emmy, she stifled the impulse and said evenly, "Oh, I only write for my own amusement."

"Did Ruth ever tell you that I was something of a writer?" asked Emmy.

"Why, no." Marian looked interested. "She has often spoken of your wonderful singing, though. I should love to hear you sing."

"Perhaps I'll sing for you some time," conceded Emmy in a patronizing tone that Marian inwardly resented. "In return you might read me one of your stories."

"I couldn't read aloud the things I write," confessed Marian. "I should feel foolish and

embarrassed. Besides, I didn't bring any of my scribbling with me to the Catskills. All my literary attempts are in my trunk at the Garniers."

"That's unfortunate," shrugged Emmy. "It was awfully nice for Ruth that you could come with her to the Catskills, wasn't it?"

This innocent question caused Marian's cheeks to burn afresh. She wondered what lay behind it. Was it merely casual? She remembered Ruth's frank admission to her that she had been prepared to resent her visit. Was it possible that Ruth had written slightingly of her to Emmy before meeting her? She could hardly credit it. Ruth was too fair and straightforward for that. She dismissed the suspicion from her mind as unworthy.

"Ruth can answer your question better than I," she returned with forced tranquillity.

"Ruth is such a dear," pursued Emmy. "She is always thinking about making others happy. She would put herself to any amount of personal inconvenience rather than seem selfish or inhospitable. Last year, at Miss Belaire's, she was always changing her plans for the sake of pleasing the other girls. It used to provoke me dreadfully. I often advised her to please herself occa-

sionally, instead of always being a martyr to duty. Of course, in *your* case it was entirely different. One's guests are entitled to one's first consideration. But I must not disturb you. You will never finish your letter if I keep on talking. I think I'll take a stroll to the veranda. The girls seem to be having a good time out there." Emmy lazily quitted the davenport and sauntered toward the door. "I'll leave you to write in peace," she smiled over her shoulder. But the curve of her red lips suggested a mockery of her verbal consideration.

Marian stared unseeingly after Emmy, the prey of many emotions. The French girl had left her in a far from peaceful state of mind. Underneath Emmy's affably-uttered praise of Ruth, Marian detected double meaning. Ruth's unselfish nature had been used by this beautiful, insolent girl as a knife with which to stab her. She could have received the thrust lightly had it not been for the one tormenting thought that Ruth had not really wished her to join the house-party. Perhaps she had written Emmy to that effect. It would quite explain the French girl's carefully veiled insults. If this were true, then the cousin she adored had been guilty of double dealing. She had deceit-

fully insisted on Marian's companionship and had privately deplored the fact to Emmy.

What was to be done? If she went frankly to Ruth to demand the truth, and Ruth were really deceitful, then she would no doubt meet her with further deceit by assuring her that there was no hidden sting in Emmy's words. That would indeed be hard to bear. On the contrary, if Ruth were all that she still believed her to be, she would not hesitate to answer the question that now formulated itself in Marian's brain. As, with chin in hand, she pondered sadly, the sound of Ruth's cheerful tones floated in from the veranda. In that voice rang sincerity and truth. Perhaps it would be hardly worth while to ask that question. Marian felt that she already knew Ruth's answer. Yet to withhold it meant that within her there would ever lurk a lingering doubt. Her sensitive nature urged her to set the doubt at rest. When she and Ruth had retired to their room that night, she would frankly put the matter before her cousin.

Her mind more at ease, Marian proceeded to finish her letter. It was hardly out of the way when Frances appeared and began laying before her voluble plans for the great ghost scare which she

had decreed should take place on the first dark night. She had been privately consulting the almanac and had discovered that it would soon be the dark of the moon. She had yet to unearth a pair of stilts, but she had not given up hope that they might materialize at the proper moment. Frances' glee was infectious and Marian forgot her doubts and fears.

After dinner the Equitable Eight, equitable indeed with the exception of one member, whose defect did not appear on the surface, repaired to the living room for an evening of "stunts." Betty recited "Lasca" and "The Absent-Minded Beggar" with fine dramatic effect. Anne Follett offered a particularly beautiful little nocturne on the piano. Afterward she electrified her friends by modestly claiming it as her own composition. Jane contributed to the affair with a clever exhibition of buck and wing dancing, the intricate steps of which she had learned by watching the darkies dance on her father's plantation. Anne, who also claimed the South as her home, knew the music best suited to Jane's steps and the girls hailed this contribution with delight as well as surprise, for Jane had never mentioned to them her ability in this particular art.

Sarah and Frances went through with a ridiculous, old-fashioned dialogue, which Frances had stumbled upon in an ancient reader, bought at a second-hand book store in Hillside. The two friends had pounced upon the dialogue, learned it and privately practiced it with much glee. They had agreed to save it for a great occasion, but for one reason or another had never given it. Thus this rare bit of literature had languished unspoken, to be seized upon with joy as a fitting contribution to the stunt party. Ruth sang a baby song with a hesitating, lisping accent, in a high-keyed, childish voice, and Marian recited a funny little poem about a frenzied poet who tried to give a reading of his verses at an afternoon tea, where no one would stop talking long enough to listen to him.

At her own request, Emmy was last on the programme. During the evening she had been a model of smiling affability and the girls now looked eagerly forward to hearing her sing. Sure of the profound admiration her beautiful voice always called forth, she wished to heighten the effect by being last. Refusing Anne's offer to accompany her, she sat down at the piano, her long, slender fingers wandering lightly over the keys.

Drifting into the prelude of Tosti's plaintive "Good-bye," she sang it with the wealth of expression that the romantic temperament of the Latin knows best how to impart. Without waiting for applause she began a French song, full of brilliant runs and trills, which showed off her glorious voice to its best advantage. When she had finished singing it, she turned about as though to leave the piano. A chorus of eager, protesting voices, begging for more, caused her to face the keyboard again. "Just this one," she stipulated with a shrug. Then she sang in French the marvelous aria from "Sampson and Delilah."

The stunt party ended with the return of Miss Wyndham, who expressed such energetic regret at having missed it, that the performers obligingly pledged themselves to give it all over again in the near future for her benefit. Not to be outdone, she promised a taffy pull in the kitchen. The entertainers willingly trooped after her to the humble realm of pots and pans, to revel for the next hour in sticky sweetness.

It was not until they were preparing for sleep that night that the disquieting thoughts of the afternoon returned to Marian.

"What makes you so quiet, Marian? Didn't

you have a good time to-night?" Ruth eyed Marian speculatively as the latter sat soberly plaiting her long brown hair.

"I had a *beautiful* time, Ruth." Marian spoke with the utmost sincerity. "How clever your friends are!"

"I think I have a decidedly clever cousin," was Ruth's complimentary retort. "That thing you recited about the poet was so funny. I am the only one who didn't contribute much. Stunts aren't in my line; the showing-off kind, I mean. Isn't Emmy's voice glorious? I could listen to her all night and then beg for more."

"She sings with great expression," said Marian slowly. "That reminds me, Ruth." Marian's heart beat a trifle faster, though her voice was tranquil. The mention of Emmy's name brought before her the question she had yet to ask. Striving to speak casually, she went on. "When we were on the train that brought us to the Catskills, did you not say that you had not written Emmy about me?"

"Yes," was the quick rejoinder. "Why do you ask?"

"I was thinking about it this afternoon and it occurred to me that you had said that."

"That was one reason Emmy acted so queerly, at first," explained Ruth. "She thought I ought to have written her, you know. But it doesn't make any difference now. Emmy is quite herself again. One could see that from the way she acted to-night. If she were still cross with me, she would have shown it. Don't worry any more, Marian. It was just a little cloud that soon sailed away. I'm so pleased to think everything is going smoothly again."

Marian's face brightened as she listened to Ruth. A thrill of thankfulness swept over her. Ruth had stood the test. Her candid admission had the unmistakable ring of truth. She was neither deceitful nor a backbiter. But Emmy had not changed as Ruth supposed. She was still nursing her grievance. She had spoken with the deliberate intention of arousing Marian to suspicion against Ruth. Marian was glad that she had asked her question. It had served its purpose. Her belief in Ruth was now unshakable. Armed with this renewed trust in her cousin, she was confident that hereafter she could meet unflinchingly Emmy's attempts to annoy her, and brush them aside as unworthy of notice.

CHAPTER XV

NEAR TO NATURE'S HEART

For a week after the stunt party, life ran along with admirable smoothness for the dwellers at Wanderer's Roost. Save for the little scene enacted in the living room, concerning which the actors were mute, the Equitable Eight appeared to be living up to their name. This was largely due to the fact that Marian carefully avoided being alone with Emmeline Cerrito. She did not especially fear the jealous French girl's power to make her uncomfortable. Ruth's sincerity was a bulwark of defence. She had tried to feel angry with Emmy, but, strange to relate, she was merely sorry for her. She was so beautiful, so talented, it seemed a pity that the great good in her, which Marian guessed lay beneath her temperamental exterior, should be overshadowed by minor faults. Even a weed will die for lack of water. Deprived of the opportunity to stir up trouble, Emmy would eventually lose the desire to do so and allow her better nature to come to the surface. This was Marian's exceedingly charitable viewpoint.

Emmy's views, however, differed vastly from Marian's. She had by no means given up her campaign against Marian's peace of mind. Her alert brain had quickly divined Marian's plan of action. Appearing to fall in with it, Emmy was merely biding her time. She had tried to set Marian against Ruth, and she had failed. Either Marian was too dull to comprehend her insinuations, or else, having understood them, she had taken Ruth to task and demanded an explanation. Emmy did not believe this last conjecture to be correct. Such a move on Marian's part would have immediately involved herself. Not that she would have been dismayed. Thanks to a certain discovery she had made, she could have triumphantly carried off the situation and left dissension in her wake. Since her first essay had yielded nothing, she would be obliged to try again. Sooner or later, chance would throw Marian and her together again. She could afford to wait. With this thought ever in the background, Emmy gave herself up to the business of enjoyment, exerting herself to please and apparently quite ready to be pleased. She lost no time in reestablishing herself on her former intimate footing with Ruth, was uniformly gracious to all, including Marian, and

behaved much after the fashion of the fabled little girl, who "when she was good, she was very, very good." The deplorable fall from grace of this same little girl, who, "when she was bad, she was horrid," in Emmy's case bade fair to become purely fiction.

During this particularly happy week, when peace and equity reigned supreme, the Equitable Eight found much to do and see. Camp Fire interest came to the front with a bound. There were beads to be earned in this mountainous and fruitful territory and the girls were determined to earn them. Up early in the morning, they spent the beautiful summer days in exploring the surrounding country, always finding new and interesting things at which to exclaim and wonder.

They took long hikes, visiting the various points of interest which for years have been dear to the hearts of the tourists, who, following the example of Washington Irving, find inspiration as well as recreation in the justly-famed Catskills. The blue-garbed band of rosy-cheeked, happy-faced girls, their eyes sparkling with health, soon became a familiar sight to the guests staying at the great hotels and cottages in and about Haines Falls. As Ruth had been the magnet that drew the seven

girls to her by reason of her lovable nature and her enthusiasm in the Camp Fire movement, so she became the leader in the free life of the outdoors which they now lived. Her tireless energy and boundless enthusiasm spurred them on to make every effort to become seasoned woodsmen.

Even Miss Wyndham, who at first from a sense of duty accompanied them on their peregrinations over hills and dales, principally hills, soon became a sturdy advocate of their cause. She was wont to declare that her age alone prevented her from making a valiant attempt to win Camp Fire beads. In her trim blue walking suit and high-laced boots, she looked hardly older than the girls themselves, and the merest mention of her claim to middle age became a signal for violent protest.

After very little coaxing, Miss Wyndham allowed herself to be drawn into an alluring camping scheme, which had lain at the back of Ruth's busy brain from the moment she had first glimpsed the Catskills. The mere mention of it had fired Betty's ardor to fare forth and blaze new trails, and it had not taken long to secure the fascinating paraphernalia necessary to camp life, before which modern conveniences pale into insignificance.

That week spent under canvas, so near to Nature's heart, was one long to be remembered. To rise with the first light of the dawn, build one's own fire, cook breakfast in the open, and eat it with an unfailing appetite, was happiness indeed. The site on which the Equitable Eight had pitched their tents was sufficiently far from the ultra-civilization of the mountain hotels and cottages to give them the delightful feeling of being really cut off from the rest of the world, and they reveled in it.

The pleasure of it deepened with the ending of each day, when, supper over, they circled about their own camp fire to sing the songs they all knew, and to exchange stories and fond reminiscences of past happy days. It was pure adventure to watch the creeping darkness steal upon them, blotting out the things of daylight, until even the great trees that stood sentinel-like about the camp became huge, indistinct shapes. And who, unless he has tried it, can even imagine the bliss of making one's own bed of fragrant boughs and lying down on it to be lulled into dreamless sleep by the music of the sighing wind among the trees?

Undoubtedly they would have prolonged their

stay for at least another week, had not the dire news been brought to them by a trio of young men that a forest fire was raging its devastating way toward the very bit of woods in which they were camping. Burdened with their own camping outfit, the three youths passed the girls' sylvan retreat on their way to civilization and safety, and the information caused a hurried breaking of camp on the part of the Equitable Eight. Ruth, Frances and Betty were dispatched on a five-mile hike to the home of the man who had been engaged to haul their equipment back to Wanderer's Roost, while the rest of the party spent a busy morning preparing for the flitting.

Once their outfit was safely disposed of, the party started on the homeward hike and after being caught in a rainstorm and spending a night in a farmhouse, they arrived at the Roost early in the afternoon of the following day, comparatively fresh after their strenuous travel and highly pleased with themselves and their sojourn in Nature's personal company.

To Marian Selby it had been an especially pleasant outing, due largely to the fact that Emmeline Cerrito had been strictly on her good behavior. Kinship with the outdoors had exerted a most ben-

eficial influence over the changeable French girl. In no degree shallow, her beauty-loving soul had responded to the call of the wild. It was the first time in her short life that she had led so free and unworldly an existence, and the very unconventionality of it fascinated her. Lofty emotions, of which she had never believed herself capable, sprang to life within her. She did not understand this sudden awakening to the knowledge that "the meanest flower that blows, can give thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears." Neither did she wish to understand it. She preferred to allow herself to drift dreamily along in the new world just opening to her, allowing neither thoughts of the past or future to disturb her bliss. This exalted state of mind served to make her the pattern of smiling amiability. She was not particularly useful in camp, but she was extremely good company. She had a fund of interesting experiences to tell, due to living all over the world, and she was not chary of her beautiful voice but obligingly sang when she was asked to sing. Taking advantage of her softened mood, the girls were never tired of listening to her golden voice, and she was besieged nightly with the fervent plea, "Do sing for us, Emmy."

In consideration of all this, it was not strange that Marian should arrive at the conclusion that Emmy had indeed come into her better self. The latter had treated her with uniform courtesy, never alluding to their conversation in the living room. Ruth was openly jubilant over the marvelous change in her roommate. While in camp she hung about Emmy with renewed devotion. This in itself was sufficient to inspire the difficult French girl to good works.

Unfortunately happiness is never of long duration. Its very quality of evanescence makes it doubly dear, as three members of the house-party were destined to learn. On the road home Marian had complained of a violent headache. Shortly after she reached the Roost, she disappeared into her bedroom, and Ruth, who had followed her, presently returned to the living room, where the remainder of the hikers were taking a well-earned rest, with the announcement that Marian's head was aching frightfully.

"I'll go to her at once," announced Betty solicitously. "Perhaps I can do something to relieve it." Betty rose to follow Ruth, who had turned from the living room and was halfway upstairs.

Emmeline Cerrito had not added her voice to the sympathetic murmur that went up at Ruth's announcement. Back in civilization once more, her recent forest worship had slipped from her like a cloak. Immediately on returning to the Roost, she had called up the Silver Birch Inn garage and ordered her car. She had decided to go to Haines Falls on a number of errands and had invited such of the girls who wished to accompany her. Ruth had accepted her invitation with alacrity, as had also Frances and Jane. Anne, Betty and Sarah had declined, preferring to take their luxurious ease at home. Marian had disappeared before Emmy had had time to invite her.

Seized with a sudden thought, Emmy sprang from her chair and hurried into the hall. "Wait a moment, Ruth," she called.

Ruth halted on the stairs at the command. "Go on up, Betty. I'll be with you in a minute. What is it, Emmy?"

"You are not going to let Marian's headache interfere with our trip to Haines Falls, are you?"

"I am sorry, Emmy, but I'm afraid you will have to go without me," Ruth looked her regret. "It wouldn't be right to leave Marian when she is feeling so ill."

"Betty can look after her." Emmy's eyebrows drew together in their old frown. "I want you to go with me. You know very well you are anxious to go. Don't be silly and spoil your whole afternoon hanging over her. I dare say she will be all right by dinner time. I shall be awfully cross with you if you don't do as I ask."

Ruth stared at Emmy in silence. She was again conscious of the mysterious change that had taken place in her friend. Once more Emmy was the petulant, self-centered girl who had wrangled with her over Marian on that day of her arrival at the station. Her sweet amiability had vanished, leaving instead a beautiful, belligerent figure with lowering brows and pouting lips.

"Are you coming with me or are you going to make a martyr of yourself over that ridiculous cousin of yours?" Rising anger made Emmy careless of speech.

"Marian is *not* ridiculous, Emmy." Ruth was angry, too. Emmy's last remark crystallized her decision. "I think you are unkind to speak of her so slightingly, especially when she is suffering. No; I am not coming with you. I am going to stay here and look after Marian."

CHAPTER XVI

A REFORM THAT WAS NOT A REFORM

The motor trip to Haines Falls was rather a spiritless affair, so far as Emmy herself was concerned. She sat on the front seat, beside the chauffeur from the Inn garage, allowing him to do the driving, looking for all the world like a stern young figure of Fate. Frances and Jane, who occupied the tonneau, managed to extract a fair amount of amusement from the excursion, though they were privately disgusted over Emmy's lightning change from sunshine to storm. On learning that by reason of Marian's indisposition Ruth did not intend to go with them, they wisely put two and two together. It may be set down to their credit that they refrained from all discussion of the subject.

At dinner that night Emmy was openly pettish, delivering several barbed answers to the commonplaces addressed to her, which warned her long-suffering friends that it would be discretion to leave her to herself. Marian did not appear at the dinner table, but Ruth reported that

she had gone to sleep and would no doubt be entirely recovered from her headache by morning. Marian's indisposition, however, coupled with Emmy's bad humor, cast a shadow over the members of the house-party, and Miss Wyndham's cheerful attempt at lifting it met with only mild success. Emmy retired to her room immediately after dinner, there to sulk in solitary grandeur and brood darkly on how she might even her score with Marian and Ruth. Concentrated brooding brought results. Her mind, reviewing all that she had been forced to endure at Marian's hand, jogged into remembrance the existence of a card she had yet to play. Remembrance led to action. Going to her trunk Emmy delved industriously in the tray, bringing to light several closely written sheets of paper. She smiled scornfully as she perused them. The time had come in which to use them. To-morrow—well, to-morrow would reveal a number of things hitherto unrevealed.

Downstairs in the living room six girls were putting in the first monotonous evening they had spent at the Roost. At nine o'clock, with one accord they confessed themselves not merely ready but willing to retire, and stood not upon the order of their going. But sleep, that mysterious

"death of each day's life," is a beneficent rectifier of many ills, and the next morning found the Equitable Eight on hand for breakfast in a much lighter frame of mind. Even Emmy had lost her scowl, but in her eyes lay the old unfathomable expression that spelled trouble for someone.

The swimmers of the party elected to visit the swimming pool. After making Jane hold up her right hand and swear that she would refrain from all violence, Frances announced her intention of donning the extra bathing suit of which the Roost boasted, and getting strictly "in the swim." Marian smilingly declined to accompany them, preferring to remain quietly on the veranda rather than court a speedy return of headache.

Emmy agreed to go and look on, but declined to take part in the morning's sport. An expert swimmer, ordinarily she would have looked upon the project with favor, but Emmy had other plans on hand. To be sure, she sauntered along with the bathers, a lovely, indolent figure in her smart white linen frock. She affected amused interest as she stood on the bank of the swimming pool and watched the girls splash about in the water. But the moment their laughing attention became riveted on Frances, who was making desperate at-

tempts at learning to float, she strolled languidly away and was soon lost to sight among the trees of the little grove near which the pool was located.

Once she was well out of sight, her languor vanished. Taking a somewhat roundabout course she hurried on until she reached the highway that led directly up to the rear of the Roost. Now and then she glanced back in the direction of the pool. The thick growth of trees secluded it from the highway, making it ideal for bathers. As she could not see the girls, she was fairly certain that they could not see her. Given they could, they might not recognize her at that distance.

Reaching the Roost at last, she skirted the house and made for the veranda. The girl in the porch swing raised her eyes from her book at the sound of Emmy's light feet on the steps.

"Oh!" Marian exclaimed. "Have the girls finished their swim so soon? I didn't expect them back for some time yet."

"I came back alone," vouchsafed Emmy briefly. She passed on into the house and up the stairs.

Marian returned to her reading, a little pucker of perplexity on her forehead. She knew nothing of the change a single afternoon had wrought in

Emmy. What puzzled her was the curious, hostile glance the latter had flashed at her as she ascended the steps. In camp Emmy had appeared at times actually to like her. Had her former spirit of unfriendliness returned?

Deep in her own disturbing reflections, she hardly sensed Emmy's return to the veranda, until she heard her say, "I am glad we are alone this morning. I have something to show you. By the way," Emmy shot a hasty glance toward the living room, "where is Miss Wyndham?"

"In her room, I believe." Marian's voice was even, but her heart had begun an unpleasant thumping. Instinct warned her that something disagreeable was about to happen.

"Please read this." Emmy dropped an open letter into Marian's lap, then leaned against a porch pillar, her black eyes riveted on Marian, as one about to witness the beginning of a highly interesting drama.

Marian picked it up mechanically and began to read:

"DEAREST BETTY:

"Something perfectly dreadful has happened. A miserable, interfering cousin from Springfield, Missouri, is about to thrust herself upon us for a visit, and spoil my lovely

plans for joining your house-party. I am simply furious over it and—"

The writing swam in a mist before Marian's eyes. Tearing her gaze from the offending letter she held it out to Emmy with hands that trembled. "I—I—can't—read—it," she choked. "It—isn't—for me." Turning her face toward a side of the porch swing, Marian leaned her head against it and burst into tears.

Emmy's face registered a mixture of satisfaction, surprise and chagrin. She was glad that she had made Marian cry, but she had not expected this awkward hitch in her plans. Marian's honor was something on which she had not reckoned.

"You might as well go on with it," she sneered. "You read part of it."

Marian raised her dejected head with a jerk. A swift rush of righteous anger drove away her tears. "If I had known what it was you handed me to read, I would have refused to look at it. As soon as I understood, I stopped reading. You took an unfair advantage of me. You are a cruel, unfeeling girl. But just allow me to ask you this: How did *you* happen to have Betty's letter in your possession?"

The question struck home. A bright flush dyed

"I — I — can't — read — it," she choked. "It — isn't — for me."

Emmy's white skin rosy red. Instantly recovering herself, she laughed unpleasantly. "Naturally you are curious to know. Perhaps you imagine that I stole it. Think as you please. Still, you have read enough of the letter to know what a burden you have been to Ruth. You see I know all about it. As Ruth's best friend, she keeps very little from me. What amazes me most is your deliberate selfishness. If you had been as high-principled as you pretend to be, you would never have come here."

Marian regarded Emmy steadily, her mild brown eyes filled with wounded pride. "Do you imagine that I would have come here unless urged to do so?" she defended gravely.

Emmy's shoulders shrugged scorn at the utter futility of Marian's defense. "Of course Ruth urged you. She is too unselfish to stand up for her rights. She would far rather suffer than seem inhospitable. I know this, because of the way she allowed the girls to bother her last year, rather than hurt their feelings. As for Betty, she would do anything to please Ruth. She invited you because she knew Ruth would stay at home unless she could bring you here with her."

"Then what difference would it have made if I

had refused to come here with Ruth?" cut in Marian sharply. "According to your statement she would have refused to come without me, yet you wonder why I was so selfish as to be persuaded into coming here with her."

This was a somewhat clinching argument, but Emmy was equal to it. "What you ought to have done was to cut short your visit to the Garniers and gone back to Missouri where you belong," she said rudely.

But she had gone a step too far. Marian rose and faced Emmy, her sensitive face alive with condemning scorn. "Why should I allow you to criticize me in this fashion?" she retaliated with quiet dignity. "It is not I who am at fault. It is you. You have been jealous of Ruth's friendship for me from the moment we met. You are a very foolish girl to allow your jealousy to mar your life. You have everything in the world to make you happy, except one thing, and that is a kind and charitable disposition. I am sorry for you."

Marian reached for her book, and securing it walked into the house, leaving Emmy in possession of a field on which she had fought and been worsted.

CHAPTER XVII

THE ONE WAY OUT

Behind the sheltering door of her room, Marian's storm-born independence vanished, leaving her weak and trembling. She had met Emmy's unexpected attack bravely and fought her on her own ground. If only she had not given vent to that one brief burst of tears. But that dreadful letter, in Ruth's handwriting, had been too much for her. She blamed herself for even glancing at it. Emmy had taken her unawares, and she had fallen unsuspectingly into the trap that had been set for her. That she had almost instantly torn herself free, mattered little. The torture of that fleeting instant would linger indefinitely. Ruth, of whom she had fondly believed all things good and noble, had proved herself unworthy of trust. How could she have been so cruel as to write that letter to Betty? To be sure Ruth had confided to her while on the train that she had not been prepared to welcome her as a cousin. She had not minded that. She had laughed over the ridiculous impression of her which Ruth confessed to

having formed. Ruth had been extremely careful, however, not to mention that she had passed that impression on to Betty. This amounted to a deceit of which Marian had not dreamed Ruth capable.

She felt that she could have forgiven her even that. The hurt lay in the fact that, while Ruth had deceitfully pretended to be displeased at Emmy's unreasonable jealousy, declaring that she would stand by her cousin no matter what happened, she had, almost in the same breath, expressed profound disapprobation of her to Emmy. Had not Emmy said that Ruth kept very little from her? Betty, too, had not desired her as a guest. She had invited her merely to simplify matters for Ruth. With a guest in her home, Mrs. Garnier would not have allowed her daughter to join the house-party. It was probable that Ruth had stated this in the letter. If the rest of that letter tallied with the beginning, what must Betty have thought of her? And Betty had given Emmy the letter to read. How else could she have come by it? If Emmy knew that she had been invited to the house-party simply to pave the way for Ruth, then the other girls must know it also. They were so good-natured, possibly they had

entered into a private agreement to treat her well, even though she were an intruder.

To a proud sensitive nature like Marian's this thought was intolerable. How blind she had been! She had mistaken forced friendliness for friendship. The girls had not really liked her, they had merely endured her. Too deeply wounded now for tears, Marian paced the floor in an agony of humiliation. Pausing at last before one of the windows, she parted the white, ruffled curtains and stared drearily out. The window faced the rear approach to the Roost, and as she tarried there, a tragic figure of mingled uncertainty and despair, her eyes glimpsed a line of familiar forms mounting the slope below the house.

With a low exclamation of dismay, Marian left the window. Hastily donning her hat, she fled from the room and down the stairs. She could not yet bring herself to face the returning girls. She wished to be alone to decide her further course of action. As she stepped out on the veranda she was glad to note that it was deserted of occupants. Above all, she did not wish to see Emmeline Cerrito. In order to avoid the oncoming girls, she set out in the direction of Lookout Pass. It was not long until she had rounded the

corner of the bluff where the trail began, and was well down the Pass. She did not slacken her pace until she had reached the spot where the natural pass ended and the trail continued up the little hill and down again on the other side to merge into the space of open ground beyond. Marian paused at the foot of the green slope, undecided where to go.

She was now completely out of sight of the Roost. She longed to find a sheltered spot where she might sit down quietly and think. Her straying eyes happening to light upon a blackened stump a little to one side of the trail, half-concealed by tall, thick-growing bushes, she walked over to it, parted the tangled greenery and seated herself upon the stump. The grateful silence of the place, broken only by the gently-rustling leaves of the neighboring trees, or the plaintive note of a forest bird, soothed her troubled mind. Here, at least, all was peace. Hidden from the world by the walls of living green, she might battle with her problem undisturbed.

Beginning at those happy days spent at the Garniers, she went sadly over all that had since occurred. As is usually the case with extremely sensitive persons, the humiliating conviction that

she was an intruder magnified each trifling event, causing it to point plainly to the bitter knowledge that she had forced herself into the company of those who did not desire her presence. Now there remained but one alternative. She must go to her own home, and at once. Moreover, she must slip away quietly. No one at the Roost should discover that she had gone until she was well away from the Catskills. But how was she to take her departure without being seen?

Before Marian had time to consider the answer to this question, her meditations were unexpectedly interrupted. The crackling sound of breaking brush, trodden under foot by someone coming down the Pass, assailed her ears. Her mind leaping to the possibility that one or more of the girls had missed her and set out to find her, Marian crouched low among the protecting bushes. She did not wish them to find her, nor did she at that moment care to see them.

As she peered cautiously out from between the leaves, she gave a faint gasp of astonishment. The two figures about to ascend the hill were certainly not those of any of her companions. Nevertheless, one of them was alarmingly familiar. A tall, fierce-eyed woman, whose black dress

accentuated her terrifying features, stalked grimly by Marian's hiding place, leading or rather dragging beside her a tiny boy, whose baby feet were engaged in a futile struggle to keep pace with those of his glowering companion. The child was attired in a faded brown linen suit, and his shabby little shoes were gray with dust. A round hat of cheap straw completed his costume, and from under it looked a pair of the most pathetic blue eyes that Marian had ever seen. He had a pale, sensitive face from which all the joy of happy childhood was missing, and his lips drooped at the corners as though he were on the verge of crying but afraid to do so.

Just as this strangely-assorted couple passed Marian, the woman jerked the boy savagely by the arm. "'Urry! 'Urry!" she commanded. "You not 'urry, I w'ip." Terror looking from his blue eyes, the boy stumbled along in a desperate effort at speed, and so they passed on up the hill and out of sight.

Remaining in concealment only until they had disappeared, Marian bounded out from among the bushes and started up the Pass at a swinging walk. For the time being all thought of self had taken wing. At sight of the black-garbed fig-

ure a daring plan had leaped to her brain. This woman was the mysterious occupant of the haunted cottage, who had so fiercely objected to hers and Frances' intrusion on the day when they had innocently peeped in the window of the old house.

Marian smiled bitterly as she recalled the event. She was destined, it seemed, always to be an intruder. Very well, she would continue to live up to her reputation. She had promised herself that she would find out more about the occupants of the haunted cottage. There could be no better time than the present in which to keep her vow. With the mistress of the gingerbread house away, she could prowl about the place at will, provided there were no other inmates to resent her trespassing. She wished to satisfy herself on at least one point. Were there other children at the cottage? If this were so, then Betty had no doubt been correct in her supposition that the woman was merely a poor creature, driven to a hatred of the well-to-do in general by her struggle to bring up a family on little or nothing. Betty had promised to make inquiry concerning the woman, but in the busy round of good times that had followed their hike to Sunset Rock she had forgotten.

The memory of the tiny boy's pathetic little face, with its solemn blue eyes, haunted Marian as she hurried along. A new problem now confronted her. How could she emerge from the Pass and cross the fields to the cottage without being seen from the Roost. With the girls inside the house, it would be easy. Marian devoutly hoped they would be inside. Luckily for her, they were at that moment upstairs, drying their wet hair. Even Emmy was not visible.

Finding the coast clear, Marian dashed out of the Pass, made a wide detour of the Roost and was off and across the fields on the run. She wished to put distance between herself and the house. If she were then seen, she would be too far away to permit hailing. It was farther to the cottage than she had supposed. On her first visit to it with Frances as her companion, the way had not seemed long. At last she was clambering down the steep slope above it, to bring up presently among the tall beech trees that hemmed it in. Pausing behind one of them, she listened intently, her eyes fastened on the dingy house. A kind of uncanny solitude hung over it that made her wish she had not come.

Conquering her brief dread, she approached the

selfsame window into which she and Frances had stared, and brushing away the cobwebs, peered inside. No living thing rose to protest against her curiosity. The inside of the cottage presented its usual poverty-stricken appearance, and no sound issued from within. Emboldened by her first venture, she slipped cautiously around the cottage, peeping into the windows as she went. Still no sign of life greeted her. Coming to the back door, she doubled her fist, hesitated, then beat an energetic tattoo on the timeworn panels. It brought no answer. Then she repeated the experiment on the front door, with no other result than bruised knuckles.

Her failure to find anyone at home went far toward proving that the wailing cry they had heard that other morning came from the lips of the child she had lately seen. She doubted the supposition that he had either brothers or sisters. If he had, they were certainly not in evidence. As for the mother, provided she were his mother, as Marian also doubted, she was from all appearances hardly a fit parent for this delicate, ethereal-looking boy. The case would bear looking into. Glancing up at the sky she noted that the sun had disappeared behind the clouds

that were beginning to loom up darkly in the west. She turned reluctantly away from this house of mystery, resolved that her last act before leaving the Roost should be one of mercy. She would privately put the matter before Betty, just before retiring that night, relate all she had seen and urge her not to delay her inquiry. She preferred to do this secretly, as she was not in the humor for recounting her adventure to the others.

As Marian retraced her steps toward the Roost, once more her own sorrows laid heavy hold upon her. While she walked she planned her flitting. She would pack her trunk the following morning, at a time when Ruth was absent from the room. In the early afternoon she would steal away on the pretense of going for a walk down the Pass, and continue on to Haines Falls. She would stop at Silver Birch Inn for dinner, write a note from there, simply stating that she had found it necessary to go home, giving directions regarding the shipping of her baggage. She would mail the note on her way to the evening train. It would be received at the Roost the next morning, when the girls could have a general rejoicing because she had removed her obnoxious presence from their midst. Marian's feelings had quite run

away with her, but under the existing circumstances she could hardly be blamed for taking so pessimistic a view of matters.

When in full sight of the Roost, she spied a girlish figure leaning out of a window, waving wildly at her. It disappeared, only to reappear on the lawn, and dash to meet her at a reckless speed.

"Where on earth have you been?" demanded Frances breathlessly. "I've been looking high and low for you. The girls are planning to have a sing to-night on the veranda, so you can guess what is due to happen."

"You mean—"

"The ghost party, of course," broke in Frances gleefully. "I haven't found the stilts, but I've annexed some ghostly, ghastly sheets. We'll powder our faces dead white and, presto! some scare for the sentimental warblers. The night is going to be good and dark. See those clouds? I only hope it doesn't rain. It would put a stop to the ghost walk."

It was on Marian's tongue to refuse. Then a sudden warmth of affection for this merry, mischievous girl rose within her, causing her to say instead, "All right. I'll be with you." Some-

how she could not help feeling that Frances really liked her. They had been such good comrades. Perhaps, after all, Frances alone knew nothing of the slighting way in which the others regarded her. Frances was too boyishly full of mischief to gossip. It would be as well to maintain her usual friendly attitude toward the girls up to the time of her flight. She did not wish them to suspect that all was not well with her. It would be hard to be her usual self with Ruth. But she thought she could carry off the dissimulation for one night. She had a strong premonition that Emmy would not betray to anyone what had passed between them that afternoon. It would not redound to her credit to do so. At dinner she would meet them all with a smiling face. To-night meant one thing; to-morrow another. But to-morrow would find the unwelcome guest many miles from Wanderer's Roost.

CHAPTER XVIII

AN EXCITING GHOST WALK

True to Frances' prediction, a lowering, cloud-hung twilight ushered in a night sufficiently dark to entice any adventurous ghost to walk abroad. Despite the threat of storm in the heavy clouds, no rain fell. An obliging wind rose to the occasion and sighed dismally through the trees, greatly to Frances' delight.

"We couldn't have chosen a better night," she whispered to Marian, as, dinner finished, the girls flocked to the veranda for their sing. "We'll go out there with them. They won't begin to sing for a while yet. If they propose it I'll say, 'Oh, let's wait until a little later before we begin.' Then I'll start an argument with Jane. I've a fine one ready. While we are holding forth, you must fade away and disappear. Sit near the door, so you won't be noticed. I'm going to start Jane on an argument about a play we went to last winter. It was on her birthday, so of course she'll remember it. I shall ask her if it was on the tenth of January. She will say it was on the

fifteenth. Then I will ask her if she is sure of that. You can imagine what plain Jane will say. Then I'll say, 'Let me see, I believe I have that very programme in my trunk.' I have. I brought it along on purpose to tease her.

"She will instantly order me to produce it, simply to prove that she is right. I will go upstairs to get it, but I won't return by the way I went. You must be all ready when I come up. The sheets and the powder are in my room; also two pairs of white shoes. When I don't appear, the girls will think I am still hunting the fateful programme. But instead I'll be streaking down the back stairs, enveloped in a fateful sheet. It will have to be quick work, but trust that to me. As I leave the veranda to go upstairs, I'll say, 'Better start your sing, girls, while you are waiting for me.' That will sound self-sacrificing and noble." Frances chuckled boyishly. "They are pretty sure to do it. Just as they begin to warble sweetly we'll appear in all our ghostly habiliments. If they don't scare, but start to chase you, run like a hunter. If they catch us they will be sure to pay us for trying to scare them."

Marian listened smilingly to these well-planned directions. Mischievous Frances, with her joy-

ous habit of extracting endless fun out of life, was irresistible.

Things happened exactly as Frances had decreed them to happen. Once gathered on the veranda, the girls began a lively talking-bee. Although Emmeline Cerrito had not spoken to Marian at dinner, she was so uniformly pleasant to the others that this circumstance passed unnoticed. She was particularly sweet to Ruth, climbing into the porch swing beside her, and throwing an affectionate arm across Ruth's shoulders. As Marian guessed, she had no intention of betraying herself. What she desired most was to be rid of Marian. She had correctly appraised the latter, and had made her bold attack believing that Marian would act precisely as she had planned to do.

When, at length, Sarah proposed that they begin their sing, Frances carried out her part of the programme to the letter. Marian smiled as Jane's voice rose in an indignant assertion that she certainly knew the date on which her birthday came. Under cover of the argument which rose Marian slipped away, unnoticed even by Emmy, who was too busy ingratiating herself with Ruth to pay much attention to anything else.

It was but a moment's work to drape the "ghostly, ghastly" sheet over her head and about her, and pin it securely together. Making up her face, according to direction, and slipping on the tennis shoes which Frances had thoughtfully abstracted from Marian's room, she was ready to ha'nt the unsuspecting singers. Frances was not long behind her. Dashing into the room with a joyful giggle, she was into her make-up in a twinkling. As silently as the proverbial specter is said to move, two sheeted forms stole softly down the back stairs and into the night, narrowly missing an encounter with the cook, who appeared on the back porch just as they vanished around the corner of the house.

In the meantime, Frances' noble thoughtfulness had borne fruit. The singers were nicely started on "Then You'll Remember Me," and were lifting up their voices tunefully.

"They'll remember us, all right," muttered Frances. "Now!"

"There may, perchance, at such a time,
Some recollection be—"

warbled the chorus. The "be" ended in a piercing shriek of horror from Jane. She leaned far forward in her chair, pointing a shaking finger at

two terrifying white forms which were gliding majestically across the lawn in the direction of the Pass. Her scream was the signal for a general alarm. For a moment the shock of seeing these gruesome apparitions had its effect on the erstwhile placid vocalists.

"It's a ha'nt," quavered Jane. "I've always known there were such things, but I never expected to see one." Her trembling tones held a note of awe.

"Ha'nt nothing!" sputtered Sarah Manning. A great light had broken upon her. "It's that wicked Frances and—yes—Marian is missing. Let's chase them, girls, and pay them for scaring us so."

Sarah's blunt tones brought reassurance and bravery to the victims of the joke. With one accord they clattered down the steps in a headlong race toward the Pass.

"They're coming!" exclaimed Frances. The two ghosts had halted just out of sight to await developments. "Run, Marian, for all you're worth!"

Marian started down the Pass in a hurry, running like a hunted fawn. Frances essayed to follow her, but her ghost robe wound itself about her

feet, causing her to sprawl headfirst into a very thorny blackberry bush. A shout from above informed Marian that disaster had overtaken her specter comrade. She slackened her pace, then halted. Laughing cries of, "Take her back to the house and slay her!" and, "Annihilate the ghost!" warned Marian to stay where she was. Unafraid in the dense darkness, she stumbled her way farther down the Pass. She would wait a little, then take off her incriminating sheet and walk sedately back to the house. Intent on punishing the fun-loving Frances, they would in all probability go on without trying to catch her. Receding voices, mingled with howls of protest from Frances, informed her that the latter was on her way to receive her just dues.

With a faint sigh, Marian raised her arm to begin the work of transforming a ha'nt into a somber-faced young woman.

"*Mi madre! A-h-h, mi madre!*" The poignant scream of terror caused Marian to whirl in her tracks. She started forward on the run. Again the cry echoed down the Pass. This time the shrill frightened notes of a childish voice mingled with it. Heavily running footsteps and the sharp crackling of underbrush told her that

at sight of her some one had been put to frenzied flight. The sound of a fall, followed by a baby's cry of pain, sent Marian racing forward through the darkness. Stumbling over what might have been a small log, except that logs are not soft and yielding, neither do they move, Marian cried out in alarm. Stooping, she raised the object against which she had stumbled in her arms. Too dark to see, she could only guess at what she held.

"Don't be frightened, dear," she soothed. "I'm not a ghost, even if I do look like one."

Only a long shuddering breath answered her. Frightened at the consequence of what had been intended as play, Marian sped up the Pass as fast as the darkness would allow her to travel. It was a very subdued ghost that hurried across the lawn and up the steps of the Roost with its strange burden.

"Oh, you ghost!" Jane made a dive for Marian, then shrilled an amazed, "Quick, girls! See what Marian has found."

The girls had already seen. Half a dozen hands reached out to relieve her of the little figure that lay limp within her arms. It was Betty who carried the child into the living room, followed by her excited friends. Laying the

youngster on the davenport, she turned to Marian. "What—where—did you find him?" she stammered.

Marian had torn off the sheet, brushed the powder from her face and was now eagerly scrutinizing the tiny boy in the faded brown linen suit. His little round hat was gone, and his closely-cropped brown hair made him look more frail than ever. He blinked at his preservers in an ecstasy of mingled wonder and terror. "It's the same child," Marian murmured. Then she began a rapid account of the afternoon's events, finishing with the final startling denouement that had taken place in the Pass.

"That woman will come back for him," asserted Betty positively. "When she gets over her fright she will realize that someone has been playing a joke."

"What is your name, little boy?" Ruth knelt beside the davenport and took the child's hand in hers.

"Wawa Taywee," lisped the child, his large blue eyes solemnly fixed on Ruth.

"He must be Japanese!" exclaimed Jane.

"Japanese!" scoffed Sarah. "He's no more a Jap than I am. Look at his blue eyes."

"Where is your mother, dear?" queried Ruth.

"Probably at Haines Falls by this time," giggled Frances.

"That *was* a foolish question," Ruth admitted with a smile. "I should have said, 'Who is your mother?' Is that tall dark lady your mother?" she went on.

The child shook his head. "Mamma's goned 'way. Wawa is hung'y." His lip quivered ominously.

"Bless his heart!" Ruth picked him up bodily and cuddled him in her arms. "Poor little mite!"

"What is the matter, girls?" Miss Wyndham appeared in the doorway. She had been in the kitchen, taking account of supplies on hand. In consequence she had missed the ghost party.

A volley of explanations was hurled at her by half a dozen voices. After much volubility she arrived at an understanding of the situation. "I'll bring him something to eat," she announced, and hastened from the room, to return shortly with a bowl of bread and milk. Seating herself in a chair, she took the boy on her lap and began to feed him. He soon took matters into his own hands by seizing the spoon and putting away the refreshment offered him in hungry little

gulps, while the girls gathered sympathetically about him and watched him eat.

"More b'ed'n' mi'k," he demanded. "Wawa is hung'y."

His imperious request was met with a fresh supply of his order. This time Betty brought it, Miss Wyndham continuing to hold him. "I 'ove 'oo," he approved, patting her cheek when he had finished. "Wawa is ti'de."

"He means he is tired," translated Anne. "Surely his mother will come for him soon."

"We had better lay him down on the davenport and let him sleep until she does appear," decided Miss Wyndham.

"Suppose she shouldn't come back," remarked Frances thoughtfully.

"Then we will put him to bed," returned Miss Wyndham. "He can sleep with Betty and me."

"Oh, let me take him into my room, Miss Wyndham!" came eagerly from Emmy. She had been a rather silent spectator of the scene. Something in Marian's face, alive with compassion, as she mounted the steps carrying the child, had touched a hitherto unawakened chord in Emmy's emotional nature. For a moment she was bitterly sorry for her cruelty of the afternoon.

Emmy bent over the boy and kissed him. He gazed at her sleepily, then slowly sitting up said joyously, "I 'ove oo. Oo 'ooks 'ike Wawa's mamma."

A laugh went up at this unexpected information. Marian's description of the strange woman had been most unflattering.

Emmy turned red, then, odd to relate, she laughed. Her smile quickly faded, a curious half-startled expression flashed into her black eyes. "I don't believe that woman *is* this child's mother," she asserted. "You needn't laugh, Sarah. I'm not trying to crawl out of my resemblance to your tiger lady. Still, I think this boy means that I look like his own mother. There's something queer about all this. What did you say that woman screamed out, Marian?" In her excitement Emmy completely forgot her antagonism.

"I'm not sure." Marian's voice was steady. In it there was no hint of rancor. This was not a time in which to maintain a hostile attitude. "It was something about 'me'—'me'—I can't think of the other word. It sounded foreign. I don't believe she is his mother. She's not an American, you know."

"I didn't know. Was it—let me see—was it—'mi madre'?" asked Emmy.

"Yes; that was it!" Marian showed surprise at the accurate guess.

"Then that helps to prove that she isn't this child's mother. This boy is an American, or else I'm very much mistaken. 'Mi madre' is the Spanish for 'my mother.' It's a common exclamation among the Spanish. The woman must be a Spaniard. Perhaps the boy has been abducted. If she comes here to-night, don't let her take him away, Miss Wyndham, until we find out that he really belongs to her."

"I won't," was Miss Wyndham's firm assurance. "A woman who would desert a child as she abandoned this baby isn't worthy the name of mother. We will sit up and wait for her until eleven o'clock; then we'll put him to bed."

"In my room," pleaded Emmy, her dark eyes glowing.

"Very well," assented the older woman.

"Let's fix up a really dramatic scene for her when she comes," suggested Jane. "Frances can put on that beloved sheet of hers and say, 'Villainess, you are unmasked! Give me the chee-ild!'"

"You may be a specter if you like, plain Jane. *I've* had enough of ghost walking for one night. I've been beaten and banged and very rudely handled." Frances put on an air of deep injury.

After placing their unexpected guest on the davenport, where he immediately fell asleep, the party settled themselves to wait the doubtful arrival of the villainess. At fifteen minutes past eleven she had not materialized, and at twenty minutes past that hour a procession of nine women climbed the stairs to bed, led by Emmeline Cerrito, who bore in her arms the waif to whom she had taken such an astonishing fancy.

Long after Ruth was fast asleep Marian lay wide awake, staring into the darkness. The unprecedented happening which had followed on the heels of the ghost party, had wrecked her carefully-laid plans for leaving on the morrow. She was anxious to stay and see the outcome of the night's adventure. Then, too, she fancied she had glimpsed a curiously appealing look in Emmy's eyes when she had addressed her. Was it better to put distance between herself and these girls, or would it be more thoroughbred in her to stay and finish the visit she had begun?

CHAPTER XIX

THE AWAKENING OF EMMELINE CERRITO

The next morning broke with no sign of last night's threatening clouds. The sun came up with a smiling brilliancy which indicated his determination to remain all day. The Equitable Eight were awake early, and stirring, for mystery stalked at their gates and they were eager to see what the day might bring forth. "Wawa Taywee," the bit of human driftwood that had found harbor in their midst, was the guest of honor at breakfast that morning.

Horrified at the neglected condition of the youngster's body, which also bore sundry telltale black and blue marks, Emmy had carried him to the bathroom and scrubbed him energetically. His vociferous gurgles of joy during the bath convinced her that at some time or other bathing had been a part of his day's routine. He was serenely at home in the tub and accepted his bath with joyful shouts and chuckles. His timidity vanished, he kept up a lively chatter, but though she listened sharply, his baby remarks conveyed to

her no information of who he really was or whence he had come. She judged that he was perhaps four years old, yet his inability to talk plainly made him appear even younger.

While she was reattiring him in the shabby garments in which he had arrived, the girls dropped in, one by one, to pay him court. All except Marian. Much as she wished to see the child, she could not bring herself to enter Emmy's room. Highly gratified at the attention he was receiving, Wawa Taywee conducted himself with the air of a young potentate, and by the time that he had made a triumphal entry into the dining room on Betty's shoulder it was quite plain to be seen who ruled the Roost.

The girls spent an anxious morning on the veranda, keeping a vigilant watch on the Pass, in the expectation of seeing the beetle-browed woman appear therefrom to claim the charge she had so cravenly deserted. Noon came and nothing happened. At luncheon little else was discussed. It had been decided that in the event of her non-arrival, the proper authorities at Haines Falls should be informed of the circumstances and a description of the boy given. But on one point they were all firm. Wawa, as they had already

begun to call him, should remain at the Roost until his identity was fully established. They would fight, if necessary, to keep him. There seemed little probability that they would be called upon to do this. The Wyndhams' social standing in the community was of enough importance to insure acquiescence to their request to be allowed to house the child temporarily.

After luncheon Wawa was banished to Emmy's room for a nap, while the girls wandered restlessly about the house and grounds, unable to settle themselves to any definite amusement while the waif's fate still hung in the balance. Presently they all drifted back to the veranda again, there to resume their watch.

"Let's go down the Pass for a walk," Jane proposed to Sarah. "If the tiger lady comes, we'll see her first. Then we can scuttle back to the Roost and give the alarm."

"All right," agreed Sarah. "I'm willing to be a busy little herald."

The announcement of their intention inspired in the breast of the others a similar desire to perambulate, and after notifying Miss Wyndham, and charging her to keep an eye on Wawa, the Equitable Eight set forth. Loitering along

through the Pass, they visited the spot where Marian had sat concealed when she first saw the woman and the child. Wandering on to the clearing, where the road to Haines Falls began, they walked a little distance over it.

Finally turning back, they climbed the little hill. Finding a fallen log of convenient size and length on the crest of the elevation, they seated themselves in a row. Marian took care to place herself as far as she could from Emmy. She was anxious to avoid even the appearance of an estrangement which the others would be quick to note. Emmy was of the same mind. She had put in an uneasy night with her conscience, and she was not in the least happy over the havoc she had wrought.

"Let's tell a tale," proposed Frances, who sat on one end of the log next to Jane, and to whom she continually appealed to give her more room. "I'll begin it. When I get well started, Jane can take it up, and so on. It's a lot of fun. Ahem! Once upon a time there was an aged man— "

"There he comes now!" ejaculated Sarah, rising to her feet with a suddenness that threatened catastrophe to her companions. "Look at him! He's the very image of Father Time."

"Didn't know you knew the gentleman by sight," gibed Frances.

Sarah did not reply to this witticism. Her eyes were fixed on the approaching figure. To all appearances he was indeed a very old man. His long white beard hung far down on his chest, and under his black, broad-brimmed slouch hat his snowy hair almost touched his shoulders. His nondescript garments had the weatherbeaten air that betokened constant living in the woods, and his shoes were covered with dust.

Up the hill he came at a good pace for one of his years, evincing no surprise at seeing the row of girls perched on the log.

"How do you do, young ladies?" he greeted, removing his hat, while his brown face broke into a wrinkling smile. His kindly blue eyes, under shaggy white brows, gave hint of a mild and friendly disposition.

"Rip Van Winkle himself," whispered the irrepressible Frances, leaning forward with a jerk that came within an inch of unseating her. The next instant Frances turned very red. The newcomer had heard and was now regarding her gravely.

"How do you do?" came from Ruth and Betty.

The old man seemed not to hear them. He was still staring at Frances. "You are a very bright young woman," he said. "How did you guess that I was Rip Van Winkle?"

Frances was stricken dumb at this amazing question. The man was undoubtedly a lunatic.

"Yes," he went on placidly, without seeming to notice her lack of response. "I am indeed he. Not the Rip Van Winkle of whom you have no doubt read, but a descendant of his. Our family goes back to the very man who slept away twenty years here in the Catskills."

"I believe I *have* heard of you." Betty's calm voice brought assurance to the somewhat alarmed listeners. Convinced that this strange old man was insane, they were on the verge of making a wholesale exodus from the danger spot. "My father has often told me of you. You have lived in the Catskills for years, have you not?"

"Certainly. All the Van Winkles have lived here. But who is your father?"

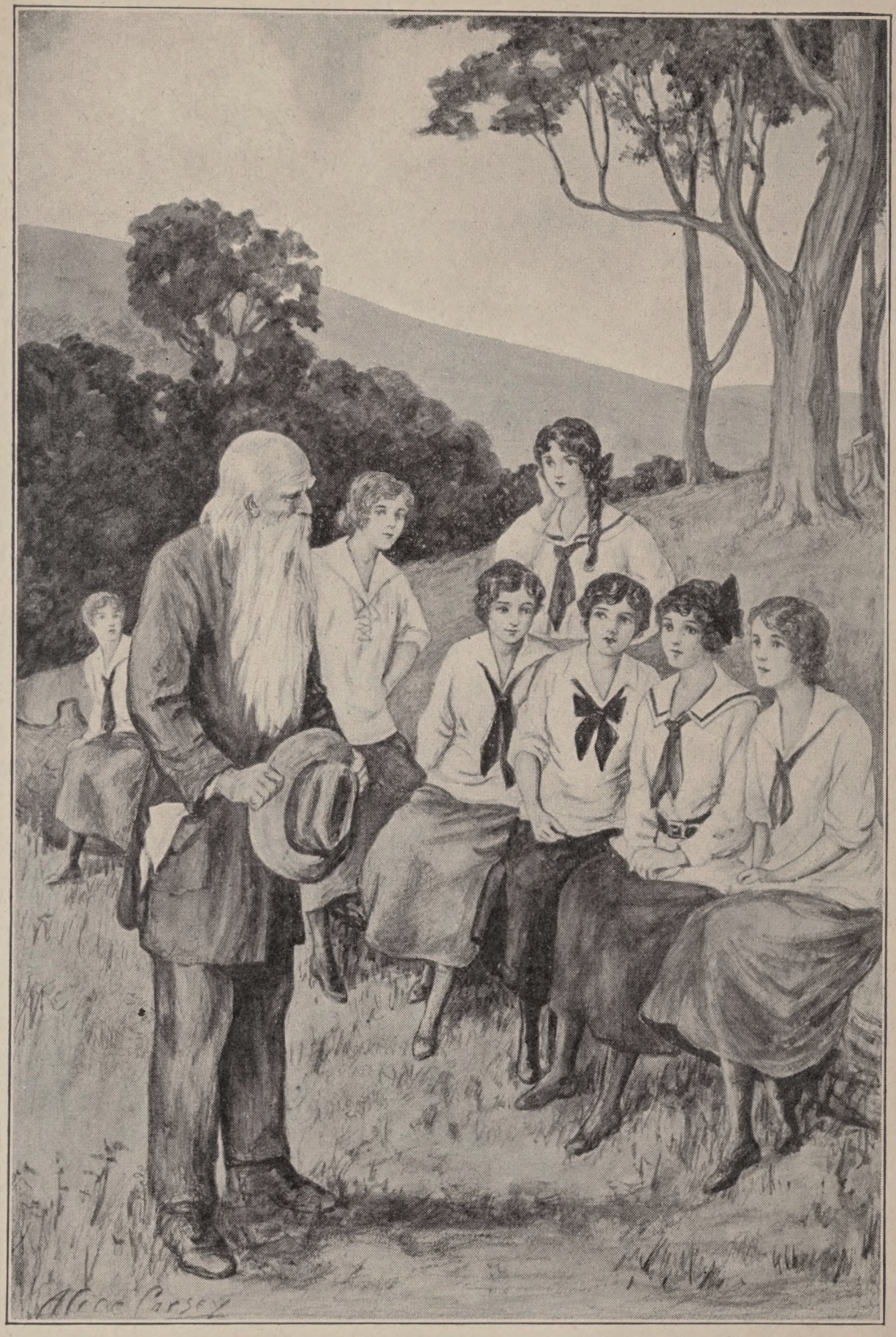
Betty told him.

"I don't remember him," was the disconcerting reply. "That is, I do not remember his name. Names are quite troublesome. But I can remember faces." He beamed at Betty.

By this time seven girls were devoured with curiosity as to the whys and wherefores of this remarkable individual with whom Betty was on such friendly terms. The longer she talked with him, the more puzzled they became. He was undoubtedly a man of education. Except for his allusions to himself as Rip Van Winkle, he was absolutely rational. It was impossible not to become interested in his quaint conversation. He was well-versed in the lore of the Catskills and soon they joined in the conversation, asking numerous eager questions which he answered with smiling serenity.

At length he bade them good-bye, stating that he was going on through the Pass and from there to his hut in the mountains about five miles distant. He made them a queer old-fashioned bow, clapped on his soft hat, which he had courteously continued to hold, and started down the hillside toward the Pass with long strides that soon carried him out of sight.

"For goodness sake, who is he?" exploded Jane, the instant he passed out of hearing. "He's crazy, beyond a doubt. I was frightened when he kept insisting that he was Rip Van Winkle. He seems sane enough about other things, though."



"How did you guess that I was Rip Van Winkle?"

Jane's thirst for information regarding the peculiar old man was echoed by her companions.

"The minute he said he was Rip Van Winkle," explained Betty, "I knew all about him. He's a character up here. His real name is Daniel Burroughs. He used to be a great hunter and a guide. About ten years ago, long before father bought the Roost, he fell down a mountain while on a hunting trip with some friends, and injured his head. It happened during a storm and his friends didn't know that he had met with an accident until hours after he fell. When he failed to come back to their camp they went out to look for him, and when, finally, they found him, he was delirious. They took him to a hospital and after a good many weeks he got well, but he was never quite himself again.

"He couldn't remember things, and he wouldn't stay in his home at Haines Falls, but went to live in a little cabin about five miles from here. Then he began wandering around the country telling folks that he was a descendant of Rip Van Winkle. I've heard my father speak of him ever so many times, but I never saw him before to-day. He's absolutely harmless and really well-liked in this region."

"But what did his family do when he wandered off and wouldn't come back?" asked Anne.

"Oh, he hasn't a family," Betty returned. "He never married. He had a housekeeper, but after he was hurt she went away to take another position. He isn't poor. He has enough money to keep him comfortably. He lives in that lonely cabin because he likes it, I suppose. We might pay him a visit some day soon—provided we can find him at home."

"That would be jolly!" approved Ruth. "He's a dear old man. I know he could tell us some wonderful stories."

"I felt awfully silly when I found he'd heard me say he looked like Rip Van Winkle," confessed Frances, "but it seems I paid him a compliment."

"We'd better go back to the house," remarked Marian uneasily. "Suppose that woman came to the Roost by the back road."

"Aren't we a pack of geese?" was Jane's disgusted comment. "We've been hanging about the Pass without a thought of that back road."

"I've been watching for you, girls, for the past half hour," greeted Miss Wyndham from her chair on the veranda as they came up. "A friend

of Betty's and mine, Mrs. Hildreth, just left here. She is staying at the 'Idlewild,' a hotel about two miles from here, and came over to make a call this morning."

"I'm so sorry I didn't see her," Betty voiced her regret. "I telephoned her the other day to come over and meet the girls. She's a delightful woman and a dear friend."

"She has invited us to a party at the hotel to-night. It is to be an unusual affair. The guests at the Idlemere have been busy for days collecting the colored advertising sheets from the current magazines. All the printing has been obliterated from them, leaving just the pictures. These pictures are to be put up in the music room of the hotel and from them everyone must try to guess the name of the firm who issued them. There will be several prizes given. Do you think you would like to go?"

A unanimous "Yes," rent the air. This promised to be a novelty worth while.

"Very well, I will telephone the Idlemere garage to send their largest car over for us to-night," stated Miss Wyndham.

"Please let me telephone for my car, Miss Wyndham," begged Emmy. "It will hold us

all, even if we shall be a trifle crowded. I'll drive and the chauffeur can wait here until we come back."

"I don't like to trouble you," demurred Miss Wyndham.

"It will be a pleasure. I'm going to phone this minute." Emmy disappeared into the house on her errand.

"What about Wawa?" questioned Ruth with sudden remembrance. "We can't very well take him with us. He's hardly presentable."

"I have arranged for that. Our cook has promised to look after him. He will be perfectly safe with her. The maid will be here also."

"Wawa will be all right with Ellen on guard," laughed Betty. Ellen stood five feet nine in her broad-toed shoes and weighed at least two hundred. "With Ellen on deck, I'd be sorry for that woman if she came here. She'd run faster than she ran last night."

This point settled, the girls began to discuss the subject of their gowns. As each of them had brought with them one or more frocks suitable for evening wear, they now hailed the opportunity to wear them.

At half past seven that night Miss Wyndham

and a bevy of pretty girls packed themselves into Emmy's car and drove off for an evening's pleasure. Ruth sat in front beside Emmy, who was a veritable dream of beauty in her imported frock of white chiffon. Her white velvet evening coat had dropped from her shoulders and as with skilful hands she sent her car spinning over the moonlit road, she looked like a lovely princess of fairy lore. She was moodily silent, however, replying absently to Ruth's bright sallies. Emmy's conscience was hourly becoming a burden and she had a wild desire to open her heart to Ruth and tell her everything. But she did not know how to begin, so she only compressed her red lips and devoted her attention to her driving.

Crowded in the tonneau, among the laughing, chatting girls, Marian, too, was in low spirits. She blamed herself severely for allowing her desire to participate in the evening's gayety to interfere with her plan for departure. Her one day's grace was almost over. To-morrow morning she must make her final decision.

Idlemere was a most picturesque hostelry, looking more like a huge rambling cottage than an inn. Unlike the majority of the other mountain resorts, it stood in an open space surrounded by a

wide stretch of treeless lawn, ornamented with low-growing shrubs and rosebushes. It was a two-story affair, built of spruce and silver birch, and was conducted by two dignified old ladies, who gave the impression of being the heads of a boarding school for young women, rather than the managers of an inn. So popular had the little hotel become with tourists, that one had to arrange far ahead for accommodations or be doomed to the disappointment of being turned politely away from its fascinating doors. The center of a colony of cottagers who took their meals at the inn, Idlemere boasted many homelike comforts which other grander hotels lacked.

The advertising contest was scheduled to take place in the music room, a good-sized apartment annexed to the main building and opening directly off the living room. Its detachment on three sides from the body of the inn made it an ideal room for dancing or entertainments. Doors on two sides opened on the lawn, where guests could stroll at will between dances or during intermissions. At one end of it was a small platform, on which stood a piano. This platform was occasionally used as a stage for impromptu theatricals, which the guests delighted in getting up.

As they entered the music room a bewildering array of many-colored advertising cuts greeted the girls' eyes. Burlap screens, collected from all over the inn, were thickly plastered with them, and the walls were also ornamented with a similar display of cuts, held in place by thumb tacks at the corners. The apartment was already well filled when the party from the Roost arrived, and were taken in tow by Mrs. Hildreth, a beautifully-gowned woman with a delightful face and a charming manner. The proceeds of the affair, each guest being required to pay a nominal entrance fee, were to be devoted to charity.

"How in the world are they ever going to find out who really guesses the most?" was Jane's perplexed question as she scanned the multitude of pictures.

"They are numbered," replied Betty. "You can see some of the numbers from here."

"Oh, I know that one." Sarah pointed to a picture, the originality of which had given it world-wide fame. "I'm going to set it down before I get interested in the others and forget it."

Two pretty children dressed as pages handed them large square cards, to which small pencils were attached. The girls joined with a will in

the contest and were soon wandering about the room, peering thoughtfully at the cuts, now and then guessing the name of the firm behind them. At atmosphere of jollity pervaded the entire company, and everyone talked freely to his neighbor with a reckless disregard for formal introductions.

"I've guessed twenty of them," exulted Anne, as she and Betty met before a good-sized representation of an exceedingly comfortable smiling baby, and paused to consider his business parents.

"I've more than that," boasted Betty. "Let me see. One, two, three—why—Anne, what can be the matter—is anything happening?"

For she had suddenly become conscious of a strange change in the laughing, chattering groups about her. Why had they all turned their backs on her and Anne, and why were they all hurrying together so? In place of laughter, there was a loud, ominous murmur, a mingling of excited, indistinguishable question and answer. She felt a thrill of vague alarm, that premonitory sense of something terrible on the verge of happening that sometimes comes in moments of disaster.

"They are going out the doors," cried Anne, gripping at her friend's arm.

"There's smoke in the air!" announced Betty, in an abrupt comprehension of the exact cause of this amazing exodus. "Don't you hear them calling 'Fire!' outside? The hotel's on fire! Come on, Anne!"

The two girls fled to join the stream of frightened men and women who were making a rapid exit through the doorways leading out upon the lawn. There was a certain amount of jostling, but on the whole it was an orderly, clear-headed rush, and in it no one was injured.

Once they were outside, a column of thick smoke, pierced by angry tongues of flame, informed the terrified guests that it was in the main body of the hotel that the conflagration raged. Built of highly inflammable timber, dry with age and the fact that little rain had fallen during the summer, the picturesque little hostelry was soon wrapped in sheets of flame. Had there been an organized hose company within call, which there was not, their efforts to put out the fire would have availed little. The inn blazed like a bonfire, and the frightened watchers were obliged to draw well back from it or run the risk of being hit by blazing brands scattered by the strong breeze.

Separated at first, the party from the Roost

gradually managed to get together. Being young and imbued with the spirit of adventure, they withdrew from the danger zone just far enough for safety and no farther.

"Oh!" gasped Jane Pellew, as a wandering cinder landed squarely in her eye. "Oh, my eye! My eye!" she wailed, as she pranced about in blind agony. Pain rendering her heedless of where she set foot she blundered headlong into an exceedingly thorny rose bush, as though determined to emulate the example of that "wondrous wise" man of bramble-bush fame. Frances promptly dragged her out. For once she did not laugh, but extended lavish comfort to the suffering Jane, who, after holding the injured eye shut and strenuously rubbing the other, finally achieved the extraction of the offending cinder.

"Stand back, girls," ordered Miss Wyndham. "You are likely to be hit by those blazing sparks." She continued to back away from the danger zone as she spoke. Reluctantly her flock made a movement as though to obey. They had drawn a trifle away from the main body of excited spectators who were too busy watching the destruction of the inn to pay much attention to them. They had lost sight of Mrs. Hildreth when the rush for the doors began, but supposed her to be safe.

Emmeline Cerrito was the only member of the party who paid no heed to Miss Wyndham's command. Her black eyes wide with excitement, she began to move forward, rather than back, apparently oblivious to all else save the fierce snapping of the crackling flames as they devoured their prey.

An unusually strong gust of wind swept the doomed inn, sending a shower of blazing brands into the air. Then a concerted gasp of horror went up from those of the house-party who had obediently retreated. A good-sized brand had lighted squarely on the top of Emmy's head. It caught in her thick black hair, setting it on fire. Before she had a chance to realize what was happening to her, a pair of energetic hands was beating a tattoo on her head. Then she felt herself being drawn back by two determined arms.

Sick with terror, she saw and heard dimly for a moment. She was conscious of being surrounded by her companions, who were emitting confused exclamations of fright. Mechanically she raised her hands to her head. When she lowered them, they were filled with wisps of singed hair. Strange to say, her head did not pain her. It came to her, mistily, that she had miraculously escaped a

dreadful fate. But whose were the hands that had beaten out the hungry flame before it had had time to do its deadly work? The answer came with stunning force as her eyes rested on Marian. Her pale face drawn with pain, she was holding out her hands, while Ruth and Miss Wyndham bent over them with little cries of commiseration. Marian, the girl she had despised and insulted, had saved her from life-long disfigurement, perhaps death.

"Marian! Forgive me!" Unmindful of those about her, Emmy flung herself on her knees before Marian in an agony of remorse. She clasped her arms about the astonished girl, and buried her singed head in the folds of the latter's skirt. Stirred to its depths, Emmy's emotional nature demanded complete surrender, regardless of circumstances.

Thrilled with amazement at this curious scene, the people immediately interested in it could only wonder the meaning as they closed in about the two girls.

It was Ruth who first found her voice. "Get up, Emmy," she ordered authoritatively. "Hurry, before we are noticed and a crowd gathers."

Ruth's command wrought the desired effect

upon the French girl. She struggled to her feet, her black eyes overrunning with tears. Without giving her time to utter a word, Ruth said shortly, "We'd better go at once. Thank goodness the car was parked far enough away from the fire to put it out of danger."

"Yes; let us go," urged Miss Wyndham briefly. She had not the remotest inkling of what Emmy's anguished appeal to Marian meant, but she recognized the wisdom of Ruth's advice.

Hushed into silence by reason of that which they had just witnessed, the others of the party obediently prepared to vacate the place of disaster. Betty and Anne took Marian under their sympathetic wing, each holding gently to an arm as they conducted her to the car. Ruth busied herself with Emmy, her arm aroun r's waist as she guided the weeping girl a s Wyndham walked ahead with Sarah, while nd Frances brought up the rear, too completely stumped for even the mildest form of conversation.

"Shall I drive the car back to the Roost?" whispered Ruth to Emmy. "You can trust me with it. I have often driven our own car."

Emmy nodded. She was too much broken up for speech.

Ruth motioned Emmy into the car, then climbed into the driver's seat beside her. Mutely the rest of the party disposed themselves in the tonneau. The chugging sound of the car as it moved away from the neighborhood of the ill-fated inn somewhat relieved the tension of the moment. As they spun along the smooth road, stretching white in the moonlight before them, a low murmur of conversation began in the tonneau. It had to do entirely with the fire itself, mingled with much sympathy for Marian's singed hands. Though each girl other than Marian was secretly trying to plumb the bottom of Emmy's strange behavior, no one of them had the courage to introduce the ticklish subject. Marian alone knew the real cause of it all. Despite the pain of her singed hands, she felt a strange new peace. After all, Emmy did not hate her.

In the driver's seat, Ruth was giving her attention to her task. Meanwhile she was thinking busily. Emmy sat huddled beside her like a crushed and broken white flower. On rare occasions Ruth had seen her cry, but never had she known her to give way to such continued, silent weeping. Ruth thought she understood. Still, she wondered if back of Emmy's tears there were really some-

thing more than an awakened remorse for her jealousy of Marian. It now came to her forcibly that yesterday Marian had been strangely silent and sad. Had Emmy launched a secret, sharp arrow at Marian that had induced her low spirits? It seemed hardly plausible. Emmy had been in an exceedingly gracious humor since the morning before. True, she had been angry the day before that, but overnight her displeasure had apparently taken wing. Ruth tried to bring back the memory of Emmy's attitude toward Marian during the past forty-eight hours. She could not recall anything that hinted of violent rupture.

No one was sorry when Ruth brought the automobile to a standstill just below the Roost. The subdued return of the company contrasted oddly with its merry start for Idlemere. Confident that Emmy preferred to be alone with Ruth, her companions left them together and went on up the slope to the house.

"Come on, Emmy," urged Ruth gently. The French girl had stopped beside her car, as though trying to pull herself together. "You are completely upset from your narrow escape."

CHAPTER XX

RIGHTING A GREAT WRONG

Immediately after Marian made her brave dash to Emmy's rescue, Betty had pleaded with her to seek one of the near-by cottages and have her blistered hands attended to. Marian would not listen to this, however. Although her pale face and compressed lips indicated her suffering, she made light of her hurts, declaring that she would prefer to wait until the return to the Roost before receiving treatment. Her hands were only slightly burned, she insisted, and the pain would soon stop.

When they arrived at the Roost, an impromptu dressing station was installed in the living room, with Betty and Miss Wyndham as first aids. When Ruth and Emmy entered, the dressing process had begun. Miss Wyndham held a large bottle in one hand, while with the other she applied a soothing lotion. Betty stood beside her, a roll of gauze bandage in her hand, while the others had grouped themselves about the trio to watch operations.

"Come here, Emmy," directed Miss Wyndham.

"Let us see just how much of your pretty hair went up in smoke. Are you sure the skin on your head was not blistered? Now is the time for all good women and true to come to the aid of the injured."

"I'm not injured in the least," Emmy replied in a low tone. She walked over to where Marian stood, and laying a hand on the latter's shoulder, bent over and kissed her cheek.

Marian flushed at the unexpected caress. She made a movement as though to return it, but Betty, who was engaged in bandaging her hands, playfully ordered: "Stand still."

"Girls," began Emmy in a clear resolute voice that brought every pair of eyes to bear upon her. "I have something to say to you. I wish I didn't have to say it. After you hear it, I know you will all hate me, but I can't help that. I have done Marian a great wrong and now is the time to right it. After all she has done for me to-night, I'd be the most despicable coward on earth if I kept still. I went to Marian yesterday because I was jealous of her, and made her believe that Ruth was vexed because Marian had come to visit her and because she had to bring her here to the house-party. I made her think that Betty hadn't really wanted

her, but had invited her for the sake of having Ruth. I am afraid I led her to believe, too, that none of you girls wanted her. I told her she was selfish to come here and spoil Ruth's good time, and that she ought to have gone home to Springfield instead of accepting Betty's invitation. She thought Ruth had been talking to me about her and—"

"But I never said any of those things to you, Emmy," interrupted Ruth hotly. "I never told you that I was vexed because—" Ruth paused, a flood of crimson stained her cheeks. A dreadful thought had her in its clutch. Her eyes met Betty's. Betty's face was flaming. "Betty," she said, almost piteously, "did you tell Emmy about that miserable letter I wrote you?"

Betty shook her head emphatically. "No; I didn't tell Emmy about it. But—" She seemed unable to find speech with which to proceed. Her eyes sought Emmy's in mute, questioning accusation.

"Yes, Betty, I understand." Emmy smiled with bitter humility. "I wanted to tell that, too, but I tried not to because I didn't wish to implicate Ruth in my tangle. But since she herself has mentioned the letter, I may as well say frankly that

I found it under some papers in your desk and read it. I showed it to Marian, but as soon as she saw what it really was, she handed it back to me. She was too honorable to read it. I am the only one who has been dishonorable." She turned away her head in an agony of shame and contrition.

"Oh, Emmy, how could you?" Ruth's tones expressed a sorrowful disapproval that cut Emmy to the heart.

"I told you you would hate me," she muttered, her eyes filling with fresh tears. "I'm going away in the morning. I couldn't bear to—" She stumbled to the davenport and dropping down on it buried her dark head among its gay cushions.

Marian pulled away from Betty, who had not finished her work of bandaging when Emmy had dropped her bombshell of confession into their midst. Running to the davenport she knelt beside Emmy and wrapped her arms about her. "You are the bravest girl I ever knew, Emmy," she cried, "and I love you."

"Girls," she turned her head, regarding her companions with shining eyes, "I know very well that you couldn't hate Emmy if you tried. I'm sorry she ever said a word about that old letter.

I never intended anyone should know. It's been just a silly mistake all around. Let's forget it, and tell Emmy just how much we all love her and want her to stay. We can't afford to break up the Equitable Eight. We wouldn't have a bit of fun without our brave eighth member."

"It's all my fault!" exclaimed Ruth Garnier huskily. "If I'd never written that horrible letter to Betty, all this wouldn't have happened." Ruth's generosity of spirit had returned to her with a rush.

"It's *my* fault," mourned Betty. "I should have torn it up as soon as I read it. I am certain that Emmy never meant to read it in the first place. How she happened to come across it in that desk, I don't know."

"I never meant to read it," quavered a muffled apology from the sofa cushions. "I was looking for some stationery. It was the day I came to the Roost. I hadn't brought my things, and I wanted to write a letter. I was cross with Ruth when I found it—" Her voice trailed off into a sob that told its own story.

"Something tragic seems to be happening here," remarked Frances Bliss off-handedly. "I wish someone would enlighten us. Having heard

this much, we yearn to know more. Isn't that so, plain Jane?"

"It's not fair to keep secrets from your little pals," murmured Jane. "Here we are still in the dark—Annie, Janie, Sarey, Fanny and Miss Wyndham." But Miss Wyndham had mysteriously vanished at the beginning of Emmy's recital. The Equitable Eight needed no assistance from her in straightening out their tangles.

"Betty, will you do me a favor?" asked Ruth, seized with a brilliant thought. "Will you go upstairs and get that awful letter of mine? And, if you have it, will you also bring the second one I wrote you? I deserve to be punished for my sins. I'm going to read them both to the girls. Then they'll understand. That is, if Marian doesn't care. I won't, unless she gives her permission. But let me say, right here, that I think my cousin Marian is the dearest girl in the world, and that I have been glad every minute to have her here with me. After that, my ridiculous letter oughtn't to count for much."

"Bring forth the fateful document, stingy ones," commanded Frances, in a deep rumbling voice.

"Yes, do, and let Ruth read it to the girls,

Betty," urged Marian with quiet good humor. She had seated herself on the davenport by Emmy. The French girl had now raised her head in sheer wonder at the rapidity with which things were happening.

Now she murmured in a scarcely audible voice, "I put it back in the desk, Betty, where I found it."

Betty departed on her errand, returning presently with the two letters. Then Ruth performed her self-imposed act of contrition, reading her own hasty words, whose very needlessness had been the cause of so much unhappiness. Partial redemption lay in her second letter, written in apology for her first, after she had met Marian.

"And the moral is, my children," commended Frances lightly, when Ruth had finished, "never judge a cousin until you've seen her."

"Never judge her at all," retorted Ruth rather shakily. "I think I've learned *my* lesson."

"We've all learned lessons enough," protested Jane sturdily. "Let's shake hands all around like gentlemen and forget the whole business. We haven't so very much more time left to be together. Let's be the most Equitable Eight that ever drew breath."

"Plain Jane, although I never expected to say it, I must confess that you are really a person of good sense," beamed Frances.

Jane haughtily ignored the doubtful compliment. Marching over to Marian she held out her hand. "I'm proud to know you," she said admiringly. Then she gave her hand to Emmy with, "Cheer up, princess; better days ahead!"

For the next five minutes a pretty little love feast went on among the Equitable Eight. It ended with Anne's sudden reminder, "We forgot all about poor, tiny Wawa. Let's pay him a call."

Reunited heart and soul, eight contented girls climbed the stairs to Emmy's room, where Wawa lay wrapped in slumber. The evening had passed uneventfully for him. Ellen, the cook, had not been called upon to go forth and do battle. The beetle-browed woman was still among the missing. After whispered comments on the improvement which a night and a day of good living had wrought in the waif, the callers sought their beds, leaving Emmy in undisputed dominion over her small subject.

Morning brought fresh reports of last night's conflagration. Mrs. Hildreth drove over to Wanderer's Roost, anxious to learn what had befallen

her guests. Directly after the rush for outdoors began, she had been informed that a number of trunks were in process of being lowered out of the back windows of the inn, by the employes of the hotel. She had hurried there to see if hers were among them. Providentially, they were. She deplored the loss of a considerable amount of wearing apparel which had been hung in her wardrobe, but the bulk of her possessions had been saved. Many of the guests had lost everything. The most unfortunate of them were two maiden ladies, music teachers, who had been regular patrons of the inn for many summers. Cannily suspicious of banks in general, they invariably carried their hard-earned savings about with them. They had deposited their little hoard of money in a leather wallet, cached at the bottom of one of their trunks. But their trunks had been the prey of the hungry flames. They were, therefore, penniless. They had not even the price of their railroad fare to their home in Buffalo. They, as well as others of the inn's guests, were being cared for by the hospitable cottagers until they could adjust their affairs. Undoubtedly some sort of benefit would be given for them when matters had settled down. At present, everything was in con-

fusion. Of the Idlemere, nothing remained but charred ruins.

"Why couldn't we make up a sum of money between us to give to them?" proposed Ruth, her sympathies on fire at the distressing news.

Mrs. Hildreth shook her head. "They wouldn't accept such an offering from even the best-intentioned strangers," she demurred. "They are very peculiar old bodies, and extremely proud."

"We might ask them to come here," said Betty. "The question is, where would we put them? The Roost is already well filled."

"A friend of theirs, who owns a cottage not far from where the Idlemere once stood, is looking out for them," Mrs. Hildreth hastened to state. "Until they decide what to do, I doubt if they would leave her. It is thoughtful in you to suggest offering them shelter. My maid and I have moved down to the Sterlingworth Inn, about three miles below the site of the Idlemere. I hope you will come to see me there."

"We shall be delighted," responded Miss Wyndham. Her charges echoed pleased acceptance of the invitation.

After Mrs. Hildreth had departed, the girls accompanying her to her limousine, Betty mar-

shalled them to the veranda, their favorite roosting place, for a solemn consultation.

"Get comfy, children," she ordered. "I've something on my mind that I'm crazy to be rid of."

"Wait until I bring Wawa," said Marian. Wawa had bashfully disappeared from view the moment he heard a strange voice in his kingdom. Absorbed in hearing Mrs. Hildreth's account of the fire, his guardians had forgotten to mention him to their guest. They now lamented the omission. Mrs. Hildreth might possibly be able to throw some light on the mystery of his identity.

Marian returned without him. Wawa had retired to his chamber, or rather Emmy's room, to dismantle the shelves of her bookcase. He was busily engaged in constructing a railway train of enterprising length, in which the labor of standard authors figured prominently. Dickens' complete works furnished a towering engine, while Shakespeare trailed along unhappily as the caboose. As a promoter of travel, he had no mind for consultations, but stuck sturdily to his job and refused to be parted therefrom.

"Now, Betty, begin," ordered Jane. Marian had returned with the news that purely local rail-

way accommodations had been thoughtfully provided by the industrious Wawa.

"Well, I've been thinking that we could help those two old ladies by holding a benefit on their account. I know a play we could give that everybody for miles around would come to see." Betty's eyes gleamed behind her glasses.

"Name it," came promptly from Frances.

"Rip Van Winkle!" Betty beamed satisfaction at the commotion her announcement had created.

"But how and where could we give it?" questioned Sarah Manning. "And who would be Rip Van Winkle?"

"I'm not quite sure just *where* we might give it. But I know who would make a fine Rip Van Winkle. Can't you guess?" Betty laughed mischievously.

"Oh, I know!" Quick-witted Frances came to the front with the answer. "You mean that old man who claims to be the famous Rip's descendant."

"Exactly. I'm sure he'd be willing to do it. It's quite within his province."

"He couldn't remember his lines," jeered Jane. "A nice Rip Van Winkle he'd make."

"Perhaps he could," came from Ruth hopefully. "You see he'd love his part, and that might make a great difference."

"But we haven't the play itself," protested Anne. "I imagine we'd have a hard time getting it, even if we wrote to a publisher of plays."

"I've thought of that, too, and here is where Frances and Marian can make themselves useful. They can take Irving's story and write the play from it. It will be much more interesting and a stunt. People will like it and it will add originality to the production."

"I don't know about that." Frances looked dubious. "I may be a poet, although some persons will have it that I am not, but I am no playwright."

"Neither am I." Marian shook her head.

"Oh, go ahead and try it," counseled Jane impatiently. "If you don't, I will. That threat ought to persuade you."

"It does," chuckled Frances. "Marian, it becomes our stern duty to save an innocent public from such a catastrophe."

"I thought as much," retorted Jane. "It was the only way; so I can afford to overlook your slurs."

"Now for the rest of my plan," Betty continued. "I am going to interest Mrs. Hildreth in our scheme. She knows all the cottagers who live near Idlemere. I'll ask her to get them together, those she thinks would be a help, and put the idea before them. We shall have to have a large cast. There are the villagers in the first act, the men of the mountains in the second, and the villagers again in the third. Just a little way from where the inn stood is a meadow that the children from the cottages and the Idlemere have always used for a playground. The grass is short there, and at one end of it is a little green hill with just enough bushes growing there to make it exactly right for the mountain scene. If we could use the meadow for a theater and give an open-air performance it would be splendid. Then, too, there would be room for so many more people to see it, and we'd make a lot of money. I can't really plan much until I talk to Mrs. Hildreth and meet the folks at the cottages. If they are pleased with the idea, we can call on Mr. Daniel Burroughs, alias Rip Van Winkle, and interview him. If he yearns to become an actor, so much the better for us. He will be a great drawing card."

Betty's admirable scheme met with hearty sup-

port. Emmy telephoned for her car in a hurry and a delegation composed of herself, Miss Wyndham, Betty and Ruth, drove over to the Sterlingworth that same afternoon to put the great plan before Mrs. Hildreth. The four other girls remained at home by choice, to serve as a defense for Wawa, in case he required it. Miss Wyndham had decreed that after they made their call at the Sterlingworth they should drive to Haines Falls and inform the authorities there concerning Wawa Taywee. It looked as though the mysterious woman had no intention of coming to the Roost to claim him. She was either indifferent to his welfare or else afraid, for reasons best known to herself, to come boldly forward. The girls believed the latter to be the case. They were convinced that the child belonged to parents quite different from the virago who had recently been his sole guardian.

Their visit to Mrs. Hildreth provoked instantaneous results. She was delighted with the plan, promised to arrange for a meeting at one of the cottages, and to telephone them when the time for it had been agreed upon.

Their visit to the constable at Haines Falls was not so satisfactory. Failing to find him at home,

they were obliged to drive all over town on a will-'o-the-wisp hunt for him. He was finally run to earth, lounging on the veranda of one of the small hotels, his feet on the railing, hat tipped over his eyes, deep in what looked perilously like an afternoon siesta. He did not exhibit frantic joy at being disturbed from his rest, and was not avidly concerned in their tale. Quite content to allow Wawa to remain where he was, he agreed placidly that the matter ought to be taken up. He would make inquiries. He would also get on the trail of the foreign woman. He had not heard that a child had been stolen in that part of the country. Very likely the woman was the boy's mother. Why she did not come for the boy, he could not say. He might have added truthfully that he did not care. The matter would be cleared up, directly, was his pompous assurance.

Deeply disgusted, yet with one grain of comfort to cheer them, the party left this drowsy minion of the law to continue his nap. At least, he had not proposed taking Wawa away from them.

Several days came and went, each bringing its own business. Mrs. Hildreth's meeting was well attended and went off with a snap. It was held in the living room of one of the cottages, which

belonged to an intimate friend of Mrs. Hildreth. Brought into contact with the social life that went on at the cottages, the Equitable Eight soon grew in popularity and were invited to participate in numerous informal merry-makings. Frances and Marian alone shunned the haunts of pleasure. They were too deeply immersed in play-writing to be lured away from their labor. Thanks to their diligence, a capital adaptation of the story was soon well under way.

As soon as the play was finished, the girls copied the various parts and Mrs. Hildreth attended to having them typed. Betty was chosen to play Dame Van Winkle. Arthur Harris, one of the cottagers, was cast for the Rip Van Winkle of the early days, before he fell asleep on the mountain top. Even Wawa, dressed as a little girl, was to appear as Meenie Van Winkle, Rip's daughter. Emmy was selected to play Meenie, grown-up, in the third act, while Sarah, Jane, Anne and Ruth were quite contented to be villagers, along with a number of young men and women from the cottages. Marian and Frances declined to become actors. They preferred to rest on their laurels.

Betty was determined that old Daniel Burroughs should have the glory of playing Rip Van

Winkle as he appeared after awakening from his long sleep. Despite the laughing discouragement she met with on all sides, she was firm in her belief that the old man could be drilled into the part. "First find your hare," Mrs. Hildreth had smilingly advised her, for the aged Daniel's rambles took him over long stretches of country. Nevertheless, Betty bullied the girls into taking the five-mile hike to his hut three times before they found him at home. Having been warned that he would undoubtedly refuse to lend his picturesque presence to the play, she was joyfully amazed when he consented readily to her request, behaving like a pleased child. He accepted his part quite eagerly, promising to study it and appear for rehearsal at the time she set.

He kept his word and covered himself with glory at the first and second rehearsals, but at the third and fourth he was conspicuous by reason of his absence. About the time when they had given up all hope of him, and the play was fast nearing the evening of the dress rehearsal, he bobbed up serenely, letter perfect in his lines. Forgetful as he averred himself to be, the words which Frances and Marian had put into the mouth of the immortal Rip stuck in his mind. He reveled in the fact

that, at last, he was in a way to do credit to his shiftless, good-natured ancestor, and even the most skeptical voices were stilled before the old man's unconsciously artistic interpretation of the role.

Betty had constituted herself as stage manager by reason of her vast, secretly-acquired knowledge of things theatrical. She it was who patiently put the eccentric Daniel through his paces. The only things he could not remember were his cues, and on various occasions he wandered calmly into the first and second acts, and in consequence nearly convulsed the cast.

"You'd better chain him down or tie him to a tree, Betty, on the great day," advised Frances. "He wants to be featured all the time." It was the afternoon of the dress rehearsal and old Rip Van Winkle had just succeeded in ambling into the second act and following calmly along behind the mysterious men of the mountains as they solemnly conducted young Rip Van Winkle up the hill.

"I'll watch him like a hawk on Thursday," declared Betty grimly. Then she scampered up the hill.

After the rehearsal that afternoon, the Equit-

able Eight gathered in the living room for a little chat before dinner. With the exception of Daniel Burroughs' eccentric wanderings in and out of the play, the rehearsal had progressed with creditable smoothness to the very end. If only he could be induced to stay where he was put, the production would undoubtedly score a huge success.

"My, but you've worked hard, Betty!" exclaimed Ruth.

"I only hope everything will turn out beautifully," sighed Betty. "Being stage manager is no fun, especially when the star performer won't behave."

"Suppose he should take it into his head to wander off on one of his jaunts and forget all about the play?" was Jane's dampening comment.

"It wouldn't surprise me very much," laughed Anne.

"Don't mention it." Betty raised her hands in a gesture of comic despair. "That's exactly what I've been afraid of ever since we began rehearsals. He gave me his solemn word of honor, as a loyal Van Winkle, that he'd be on hand early Thursday afternoon. If he fails to appear, the play will be ruined. Of course Mr. Harris knows

Rip's lines of the third act. He has a good make-up ready, too, in case he has to go on. But he can't begin to be as realistic as Mr. Burroughs. He is wonderful. And, besides, it will completely spoil that place in the third act where Mr. Harris plays the son. Don't you remember? When old Rip Van Winkle first comes back he sees his son leaning against a tree with his gun. He is bewildered because he thinks he is looking at himself. If Daniel B isn't on hand to play his part, that artistic bit of business will have to be cut out."

"I have an idea he'll keep his word," remarked Emmy. "He's as pleased as can be with himself. He confided to me to-night in his queer way that he considered being in the play the greatest event of his life."

"I hope he'll keep right on thinking so," Betty declared fervently. "Isn't Wawa cunning, dressed as a little girl? He isn't a bit afraid, either. He acts as though he liked being an actor. He took to the stage like a duck to the water. I only wish we knew who his parents were. If no one claims him while we are here, I shall take him home with me. I wrote mother about him, you know, and she answered, saying by all means to keep him, if no one ever claims him."

CHAPTER XXI

A DRAMA NOT DOWN ON THE BILLS

The Thursday set for the open-air production of Rip Van Winkle found everyone concerned in it keeping an anxious watch on the skies for even the faintest signs of foul weather. But the watch was needless. The sun had never shone more brilliantly and the sky was a solid arch of blue. A pleasant activity, due to the knowledge of deeds to be performed, was abroad at the Roost. At the beginning of rehearsals for the play, Emmy had transferred her car from the Silver Birch Inn garage to the place which Betty had first suggested. Situated not far from the direct road to the meadow where the play was to be given, it was infinitely more convenient for the girls at the Roost.

Early on the morning of the great day, the Equitable Eight, Miss Wyndham and Wawa, took the short road through the Pass to the garage in gay spirits. Even solemn Wawa was in high glee, refusing sturdily to be carried. He gamboled along beside Emmy, whom he adored, and kept

everyone laughing at his funny antics. No member of the large cast appeared to enjoy acting as much as he did. The assurance with which he trod the grassy stage and in his baby voice spoke the few lines which Betty had had no trouble in teaching him, created decided wonder among his fellow actors. "He acts as though he'd been on the stage all his little life," Emmy had more than once remarked admiringly to Betty.

The house-party ate a hasty luncheon at twelve o'clock at one of the larger cottages which had been thrown open to the Misses Tolliver, who had managed the Idlemere, for the serving of meals to such of their guests as had remained in that vicinity after the fire. The Equitable Eight were by no means the only ones who had been busy working for the success of the play. The energetic cottagers had advertised it far and wide, using every means in their power to create an interest. Two young artists had obligingly painted a mammoth canvas backdrop, to hang between two removable poles, thus shutting out the hill during the first and last acts. So far as the promoters of the affair knew, nothing had been left undone. It now remained only for the public to pass judgment on their efforts.

The performance was to be given at half past two o'clock in the afternoon, as it had been voted impossible to hold it in the evening, due to the difficulty which confronted the producers of properly lighting the natural stage. Long before two o'clock the audience began flocking to the scene. All tickets of admission had been sold beforehand at the neighboring inns. Camp chairs had been borrowed from several of them, the proprietors being affably willing to help a good cause along. The space designed to hold the audience had been roped in and ticket takers established at each side of the enclosure. It had been arranged that the cast should dress and make up at two of the nearest cottages, the feminine contingent at one, the men at the other. The Equitable Eight, however, had a cottage all to themselves.

Once ready, those detailed to appear in the first act took refuge behind the big drop, which was hung sufficiently far from the hill to permit passage back and forth. The players could thus use it to make their entrances and exits in the first and third acts. The drop was to be removed at the beginning of the second act, leaving the hill in plain view. Rip Van Winkle was to open the act by strolling toward the hill, gun in hand, accom-

panied by his faithful dog, a sagacious collie belonging to the young man who played the part. Once young Rip Van Winkle lay lazily stretched at ease on top of the elevation, it was an easy matter for the men of the mountain to make their entrance on the scene from the right and climb the hill to hold their weird revel.

By half past two o'clock the chairs had been filled and a goodly portion of the audience, not fortunate enough to obtain seats, had packed itself in every available inch of space. But while they kept up the constant low buzz of conversation which invariably goes with a spectacle of the sort they had gathered to witness, tragedy hung imminent over the heads of the cast. Old Rip Van Winkle, or rather, the aged and seemingly independable Daniel, had not put in an appearance. After a hasty consultation among them, it was decided that, after a five-minute wait, during which it was hoped he would materialize, the play must go forward without him.

After they had waited in vain ten minutes instead of five, the play began in front of the Van Winkle cottage, which had been realistically painted on the back drop. In the lower center of it a door had been cut. The act opened with a

dance of the young folks on the village green, the music furnished by two rustic fiddlers. During this dance Rip Van Winkle made his first entrance, and, throwing down his gun, proceeded to caper about with his young companions. The dance had been written in by Frances and Marian solely for the sake of giving Jane a chance to do some fancy steps. She led the others with a will, and her clever dancing won instant applause from the audience. Betty, as Dame Van Winkle, made her first entrance through the door of the drop and proceeded to berate her shiftless husband. She played the scene splendidly, her work evoking much approbation. She was a trifle puzzled, however, when a sudden roar of laughter went up from the spectators at one of her speeches which hardly called for mirth. When she made her exit, wringing her hands over the reprehensible conduct of her worthless spouse, she understood the cause. While she ranted, Daniel had arrived at the edge of the enclosure and ambled his way toward the back drop in full sight of the hilarious audience. He had not waited twenty years to grow old, but had generously given the onlookers a chance to gaze on him beforehand.

Divided between laughter and tears, Betty

charged Emmy to keep strict guard over him while she finished the act. The old man was especially devoted to the French girl, whose radiant beauty appeared to fascinate him into a lamb-like obedience. Except for this one small incident, which was a help rather than a detriment, the play proceeded smoothly enough.

But whatever Daniel's failings had been at rehearsals, they were forgotten in the remarkably fine work he did in the third act. His was an impersonation of Rip Van Winkle that the departed Joseph Jefferson himself might have envied. To see and hear him, one could well believe that the fictional character had actually lived and come down through time to take part in the production. Not once did his treacherous memory fail him, and when he caught his daughter in his arms, crying out piteously, "I am your father! Young Rip Van Winkle once—old Rip Van Winkle now. Does nobody know poor Rip Van Winkle?" a thrill of pure emotion, called to the surface by his art, swept those who had lately laughed.

When the play had ended in a riot of applause, and the old man had repeatedly and delightedly bowed his thanks, the cries of "Speech! Speech!"

rent the air. Then came the greatest feature of the occasion, great by reason of being entirely impromptu. Daniel Burroughs responded to the demand, and when his intention was seen the clamor subsided into instant silence.

"Friends," he said in his clear, quavering old voice, "I thank you. It doesn't seem so strange to me that you are pleased. The part I have played comes very natural to me. You see, if I played Rip Van Winkle well, it is because I am Rip Van Winkle."

The old man paused, and a kind of momentary, awestruck quiver swept across the audience — even that majority which was familiar with Daniel Burroughs' story and his delusion. Standing there before them he did not at all resemble an actor. He appeared more like Irving's quaint old character materialized in the actual flesh. That, combined with his solemn, unanticipated statement, gave every person there a thrill of delightful half-belief.

"Not," he continued, "that I claim to be the original Rip whom the story was about. But his blood is in my veins, and I guess there isn't anybody alive that has really as good a right as I have to play this part." He rambled on at some

length concerning the Van Winkles in general, while his hearers listened with charmed attention, and at the end of it they raised more tumult than ever. It is not to be doubted that when they reluctantly dispersed it was with the certainty that so far as amusement went, they had indeed received their money's worth.

But another drama, staged strictly behind the scenes, was rapidly on the way to being played. Betty and Emmy were making their way to the cottage to remove their make-up when a smartly dressed woman, young and of considerable beauty, accosted them. She was accompanied by a tall, fair-haired man, who in spite of his unobtrusive bearing, carried with him a distinctly professional air.

"That child," began the woman excitedly, "where did you find him?" She caught Betty's arm in a frantic clutch.

"Why, what—" began Betty.

"The child that played little Meenie Van Winkle," cut in the woman sharply.

"Oh, that was a little boy we found—"

Betty's information was cut off by a low cry from the questioner that sounded like a sob. "I knew it! I knew it was our little Wawa! Oh,

Herbert, we have found him at last!" She turned to her companion and clung to his arm, half laughing, half crying. Betty eyed them in bewilderment. Had the unbelievable actually come to pass?

"There, there, dear!" soothed the man, patting the woman's shoulder. "Don't give way like this." His face was very pale, but in his blue eyes burned a strange light. "Lead us to this boy at once. He is our son." He addressed Betty in an authoritative tone that held repressed anxiety as well. "You may tell us later how he came here. Just now nothing matters except that we have found him."

Completely taken off her feet by the astounding revelation, Betty continued to stare from one to the other of this agitated pair. Emmy, too, stood dumfounded. Yet the next instant she found herself thinking that she was not so very much astonished, after all. She had never believed Wawa to be the child of the dark-browed foreign woman. In a flash, she recalled that he had often told her in his baby way that she looked like his mother. A quick scrutiny of the stranger before her showed her that so far as height, coloring and general appearance counted, a child might easily trace a

resemblance between them. "I believe you *are* Wawa's mother," she said with great conviction.

"Of course I am his mother!" The woman flashed offended eyes at her. "Take me to him, I say!"

Dazed for the moment, Betty quickly recovered her poise. "Certainly we will take you to him," she said rather coolly. She did not relish being ordered about by two complete strangers. Then the tardy realization of the strain they were both enduring caused her to add more gently, "Come this way, please. He is over in that cottage. My aunt is looking after him. We never leave him alone because of that dreadful woman who—"

"A tall, black-haired woman, with a fierce dark face and overhanging eyebrows?"

"Yes; that is the description which—"

"Dolores," groaned the woman. "That is the last touch needed. I was always sure she stole him, though we couldn't prove it."

They were close to the cottage by this time, Betty and Emmy in the lead, the man and woman at their heels. As they reached the door, Miss Wyndham appeared. "Here you are," she commenced, then became abruptly silent at the sight of strangers.

"My aunt, Miss Wyndham," introduced Betty. "Pardon me; this is Miss Cerrito, and I am Elizabeth Wyndham." It was hardly the time for introductions, with these strangers devoured with suspense and longing.

The couple made instant acknowledgment.

"I am Herbert Terry." The man's courtesy did not fail him, even at this trying moment. "This is Mrs. Terry."

"They are Wawa's father and mother," was Betty's hasty explanation. "Where is he?" Betty had double cause to be amazed. The name Herbert Terry was one with which she had long been familiar.

"Inside the cottage with Frances and Marian. He took a nap after playing his part, but he is awake now." Miss Wyndham's usually placid face registered her astonishment. She managed to say, "Come in," but that was all. Amazement robbed her of further speech.

A joyous laugh, rising to a crescendo of baby glee, proclaimed the fact that Wawa was indeed awake and stirring. At the sound, the strange woman lost all semblance of dignity. She darted past Miss Wyndham, her husband close behind her.

His eyes on Marian, who was giving a funny little Punch and Judy show with the aid of her handkerchief and her fingers, the boy did not look up. The ringing cry of "Wawa! Mother's boy!" broke up the show in a twinkling. Wawa slid from the oak seat beside Marian and hurled himself straight into a pair of outstretched arms with an abandon that told its own story. "My mamma!" he shouted, then broke into an unintelligible stream of baby talk which was smothered on the stranger's breast.

His triumphant shout brought Anne, Sarah and Ruth, who were in the next room. Neither Miss Wyndham nor the Equitable Eight ever forgot the sight and sound of that ecstatic moment of reunion. Feeling that they were intruding upon something too sacred for spectators, they retired to the adjoining room, leaving the strangely reunited trio alone with their tears and their happiness.

Once by themselves, the nine women stared at one another with misty eyes. It was Jane who first found her voice.

"I never heard of such a thing in my life before," she declared in a husky whisper. "Tell us about it, Betty, as quickly as you know how."

"Sh-h-h!" warned Betty. "She—Mrs. Terry is calling." She hurried from the room in answer to the faint, "Will someone please come here."

Betty entered the room of reunion to be clasped in a pair of soft, thankful arms. Then she felt a kiss upon her cheek. Wawa's mother had begun to realize dimly that she and her husband owed someone a tremendous debt of gratitude.

"My dear," began Mrs. Terry, "I won't ask you to forgive me for my abrupt behavior to you. I know you understand. But all that Mr. Terry and I have endured since our son was stolen from us five weeks ago has nearly driven us both insane. Won't you call your friends into the room, please? We should like them all to hear our story. But, first of all, won't you tell us everything?"

"I shall be very glad to know Wawa's story and to tell you mine. My friends will be equally delighted," responded Betty with the charming courtesy that made her an ideal hostess to the seven girls she had gathered under her roof. She stepped to the door and called, "Auntie, girls, will you come, please?"

In quick obedience to her summons the seven girls and Miss Wyndham appeared. Those who had yet to be introduced to the Terrys were duly

presented. Wawa beamed affectionately upon them, but held fast to his father's and mother's hands.

Betty quickly told the story that the newcomers were so eager to hear.

"It is marvelous, wonderful!" was Mr. Terry's opinion, when she had finished. "Here we have been mourning our boy as lost to us forever, feeling that he was perhaps suffering untold torments, when most of the time he has been safe and happy. How can we ever hope to repay you for your goodness to him?"

"We have loved to have him with us," smiled Miss Wyndham, glancing tenderly at Wawa. "He has been the light of our house. Betty had determined to adopt him as a foster brother if no one came to claim him. But we are very anxious to know how he came to be stolen. I suppose that terrible woman was the guilty party."

"Yes," answered Mrs. Terry sadly. "It is she who has been responsible for all our misery. She is a Spanish woman, Dolores Delgado, and she was his first nurse. Wawa will be four years old in December. We trusted her implicitly until last year. Then we found that she was not only dishonest, but that she was beginning to be very

harsh with our boy. We could have overlooked her pilfering, it was nothing more than that, but we could not allow her to ill-treat our child. About six months ago we discharged her. Several times after that she came to the house to visit the servants, and made threats to them that she would be revenged upon us for dismissing her. My husband gave orders that she was not to be admitted again into the house. After that we neither heard nor saw anything further of her and concluded she had gone away. I must explain to you that Mr. Terry and I are both members of the theatrical profession."

"I knew it!" exclaimed Betty rapturously. She beamed at Mr. Terry, with, "You are that great actor, Herbert Terry, of whom we have all read and heard so much."

"I am indeed Herbert Terry," smiled Wawa's father, "but I cannot vouch for the truth of hearsay and press agents."

The household of Wanderer's Roost, Miss Wyndham included, were regarding the actor with positive awe. Here was greatness at their very threshold.

"I have absolute faith in hearsay when it relates to you," retorted Betty prettily. Then to

Mrs. Terry, who was looking her approbation of stately Betty: "Forgive me for breaking into your story. We are so anxious to hear the rest of it."

Mrs. Terry smiled and continued: "We were playing in New York City in 'The Bond Eternal.' It had a run of over a year there." She modestly withheld the information that the play owed its long life to her husband's masterly interpretation of the leading character. "We were living in our own home near Central Park West, and on the day he disappeared, we had left Wawa there with his nurse, while we were at the theatre. There was a matinee that afternoon, and as the day had been frightfully hot and we were exhausted, we ordered our dinner sent in to Mr. Terry's dressing room. We did not leave the theatre until after the evening performance. Then we had our customary late supper at a near-by grillroom and did not arrive home until after midnight. I hurried to the nursery, only to find both my baby and his nurse missing. Naturally I was alarmed and ran to my husband with the news. We awakened the servants, who could tell us nothing. They had supposed that Wawa had been put to bed at the usual hour. They had not seen him since luncheon,

but as he always ate his supper in the nursery they had not missed him. The supper had been prepared and carried to the nursery by the nurse. While we were trying to decide on some plan of action, the nurse put in an appearance, and alone. She behaved like a crazy person and at first we could understand nothing she said, except that Wawa was gone.

"She became more calm after a time, and confessed that contrary to our orders she had left him in the nursery, to go out and do some shopping. She had been away not more than two hours. When she had returned it was to find him missing. Believing him to be not far away, she had started out in search of him. Not daring to tell anyone, she had ordered his supper as usual to allay any suspicion the servants might form. Afterward she had gone out to continue her search. It had lasted all evening and had proved fruitless. Completely disheartened, she had finally determined to come back and give the alarm.

"We were so distracted with fear that we hardly stopped long enough to censure her for her breach of trust. Our one thought was to find Wawa. Mr. Terry notified the police, and next day the papers were full of it. We thought he

might have been abducted for the sake of a ransom. We offered a large reward, but nothing came of it, except that we were called upon at all hours to go to police headquarters and identify numerous children supposed to be our son. It is strange that you did not read of his disappearance in the newspapers."

"I am ashamed to confess that since we have been up here we have scarcely seen a newspaper," apologized Miss Wyndham. "My girls were so occupied with their own affairs and found so much to busy them in the neighborhood of the Roost that they paid little attention to outside matters. We were away on a camping trip, too, for a week. At that time we did not even know of Wawa's existence. It was directly after we came home that Marian found him. We were not at all sure that the woman who ran away and left him was not his mother. We notified the constable at Haines Falls, but judging from his appearance, he is far from being a sleuth. He promised to look into the matter, but we have heard nothing from him since our call on him. Then came the fire at the Idlemere, and that, together with the play, took our minds off the subject."

"It has all been a case of baffling circum-

stances," sighed the actor. "We didn't hit upon Dolores as an object of suspicion until a week after our boy disappeared. Then we couldn't be sure, for we could find no one who had seen her come to the house or leave it with the boy. We mistrusted she had a key to the front door. She could never have come in at the back entrance without being seen. By the time we had furnished the authorities with an accurate description of her, she had vanished as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed her.

"We went to a boarding house where she had formerly lived, but the proprietor said that she had been gone from there for over two months. About a week ago one of our servants happened to recall that Dolores had once mentioned to her that she had friends living in the Catskills. We finished our run of the 'Bond Eternal' last Saturday. So we decided to come up here at once and go over every foot of this region, if necessary, in the hope of finding someone who knew her. On Monday last, we went to Catskill. It is a town only a few miles from here. We spent two days there, but could learn nothing. We came up here on Wednesday evening and took rooms at the Sterlingworth Inn. From the proprietor we

heard of your play, and were interested in seeing it. My wife was in very low spirits, and I suggested that among the crowd we might stumble upon a clue. But we found more than a clue."

It was half-past four when the play ended, but it was half-past six before the explanation party was over. Then it occurred to them all, at about the same time, that they were hungry. The Terrys were insistent in their pleading that the new friends, who had so generously cared for Wawa, should dine with them at the Sterlingworth. But the Equitable Eight were dying to get back to the Roost to talk themselves hoarse over the remarkable events of the afternoon. So they declined the invitation as gracefully as they could. They were also of the opinion that the Terrys might inwardly prefer absolute privacy on this momentous evening that followed the restoration to them of their son. They promised, however, to take luncheon with them the next day, and saw them finally depart, taking Wawa with them.

CHAPTER XXII

GOOD-BYE TO WANDERER'S ROOST

"We must go, go, go away from here,
On the other side the world we're overdue!"
sang Ruth Garnier softly. Then she was suddenly silent, for there was a decided lump in her throat and she could not trust her voice to further song. To-night was the last of their happy house-party. The morrow would find the Equitable Eight scattering, to seek their various homes.

One short week, golden with sunshine and glorious by reason of the perfect comradeship that was theirs, had slipped away since the memorable afternoon of the play. That brief week had fairly bustled with pleasant happenings. They had spent much of it with the Terrys, who had entertained them frequently at the Sterlingworth and had been as hospitably entertained in return.

On each occasion Wawa had calmly constituted himself the guest of honor. He was highly diverted at being the center of attraction, and took advantage of his popularity to an extent that bade fair to make him a most despotic ruler of hearts. There

had been a great deal of merry-making all around, but beneath it all lurked a little undercurrent of sadness which the thought of parting always brings.

One extremely ludicrous thing had happened which in itself was calculated to lighten the shadow of the rapidly approaching hour of good-bye. The day after Wawa's miraculous restoration to his own, the stolid constable had put in a dilatory appearance at the Roost, fairly exuding pompous importance. He had found the mysterious, beetle-browed woman. She had been discovered at Haines Falls, disguised as an Italian. He had "got her" as she walked about the streets, peddling small souvenirs of the Catskills. According to this astute guardian of the law, she had "made a great to-do and shot off a lingo of foreign gibberish." This proved that she was the woman he had been looking for. He had "picked out of her" that she was the mother of a boy, but she had "cried like a good one" and lied that "her baba" was dead. She wouldn't tell where she lived and that showed she was guilty. "You folks had better hike to the Falls on the jump and take a look at her," was his inelegant counsel.

He did not seem especially abashed at the news that Wawa's parents had come to claim him. Instead, he raised suspicious eyebrows and inquired their address. "Mebbe it's some kind of an abduction game, and them people at the hotel is in it," was his bald assertion. The assurances of the house-party that the Terrys were above reproach, he received doubtfully. He would look into that later, he declared, after the case of the woman had been disposed of. He believed in "doin' one thing at a time."

He left them in a greater hurry than he had come, after he had admonished them to meet him at his house in three hours. He had locked the woman up there in a back room. When he departed it was not to Haines Falls but to the Sterlingworth Inn that he hastened. Very craftily, however, he refrained from telling his business to the group of women he had left at the Roost. Thirsting for glory, he was now positive that he was "onto something big." His interview with the Terrys completely took the wind out of his sails. But it had one virtue. The actor and his wife agreed to go with him at once to the Falls and identify the woman.

When, three hours afterward, an excited com-

pany of ten women and one man were ushered into the fateful back room by the triumphant sleuth to view the miscreant, they found a much persecuted and justly enraged daughter of Italy, engaged in trying to flood her prison with angry tears. She abused them all in an unceasing flow of Italian that would have evoked laughter had not the sympathies of her audience been aroused to an indignation, vastly more quiet, but in keeping with her own. Familiar with Italian, Emmy took charge of the situation and in liquid accents quickly calmed the maltreated one into a more beatific state of mind. In the end, innocence triumphantly waddled forth from durance vile, clutching a roll of bills which it would have taken many days of peddling to earn, while the crest-fallen constable sought comfort in the trite excuse, "that anybody's likely to make mistakes."

And now, with their thoughts turning somewhat reluctantly toward home, a lingering regret in their hearts that they must so soon be separated, the Equitable Eight had gathered for the last time on the veranda of Wanderer's Roost for a farewell sing. The echoes of a favorite Camp Fire song had died away and a pleasant lull had settled down upon them when Ruth began intoning

half-unconsciously the very song that had been on her lips when her mother called her to the house to give her Betty's letter of invitation.

"What's that you're singing about 'go, go, go away from here'?" demanded Jane. "You needn't have set it to music. We are all too well aware of it for comfort."

Ruth smiled a trifle sadly. "I was just thinking of how glad I was the day Betty's letter came, inviting me up here," she said.

"What has that to do with your 'go, go away' song?" pursued Jane.

"Oh, I was singing it when Mumsie called me to the house to get Betty's letter."

"That was before she knew I was about to descend on Burton," teased Marian. She could now afford to jest over what had once been a heavy cross.

"That's not fair, Marian," protested Ruth, good-humoredly. "You know—"

"We all know," interrupted Betty, "that the Seven Savage Maidens were mere blots on the landscape when compared to the Equitable Eight."

"Sing some other song, Ruth," begged Jane. "I don't think I like it even with the explanation."

Betty caught up her mandolin and swung into

a lively air just then very popular. They all sang with great spirit. For nearly an hour they lifted their voices in one cheerful song after another, but at last Betty laid down her mandolin.

"I can think of only one more that we all know. I shan't tell you what it is now. I'm saving it for the last." Betty was silent for an instant. She was sitting on the top step of the veranda, and, as her eyes wandered from one to another of her friends, she was thinking of how inexpressibly dear to her they all were.

"Girls," she said rather soberly, "it has been good for us to be here. I wish that we could plan our future vacations so that we might be together for a little time, at least, every summer."

"You mean that we could have a reunion?" asked Anne eagerly. "I was thinking of that very thing, too. I'd love to have you visit me."

"There's no place like the Golden West for a bang-up reunion," asserted Sarah positively.

"Colorado's ever so much nicer than Nevada," hinted Frances. "Camp Fire Girls simply flourish there."

"The Garniers are noted for their hospitality," reminded Ruth. "Marian is included as a Garnier. She's one of the family, you know. That

invitation is from both of us." Ruth had long since determined that her home was in future to be Marian's.

"Kentucky leads in hospitality," boasted Jane. "It's noted for its reunions."

"I'll take you all on a sight-seeing tour with me," was Emmy's proposal. "I never know from one summer to the next where I'm going to live. But wherever I go, you're welcome to go with me."

"Don't forget Wanderer's Roost. The latch-string's out from June until October." This sweeping invitation was Betty's, of course.

"It looks as though the reunion was a sure thing," Jane said, wagging her head. "We'll have all next year to decide where to hold it. We've certainly had a glorious time up here, Betty, and we'll each have a few beads to add to our string, when we get a chance to tell some bead distributor of our doughty deeds. There's nothing like being Camp Fire Girls."

"Plain Jane, I agree with you." Frances favored Jane with one of her famous wide smiles. "This particular group of Camp Fire Girls hasn't done so badly. We've rescued a helpless kiddie from the clutches of an ogre and

seen him march off with his own father and mother. We've become playwrights, stage managers and actors in the cause of the needy, and sent two old ladies to their home with more money in their pocketbooks than they had when they started for the Catskills. We've snatched a lovely princess from the jaws of death, or at least from the dreadful fate of becoming a baldhead. We've opened the prison doors for the falsely accused, and proved that an Italian peddler can't possibly be a Spanish kidnapper. We've upheld the law and upbraided a constable. We've proved that the Van Winkle family was no myth, and we've worn out numerous pairs of shoes in strenuous hikes. So I really think we deserve some credit."

Frances' modest enumeration of golden deeds received the tribute of laughter, which her funny sayings always evoked.

"According to Frances we are in a class by ourselves," chuckled Sarah. "You forgot to state that our Betty has also proven her right to a stage career. I am sure she deserves special mention."

Betty flushed with pleasure at this unexpected compliment. "I'll tell you a secret, girls. I saved it for to-night. Don't think me outrageously con-

ceited, but Mr. Terry says that I have real artistic ability. He has promised to have a talk with father and mother in the near future, and if he can win them over—well—when I finish my school work I am to have a place in his company."

"With two poets, a prima donna, an actress, a composer, a debater, a welfare-expert and a giggler, we ought to set some small part of the world on fire. You can each pick out the coat that fits you," ended Sarah, her inevitable chuckle proving her right to wear the giggler's cloak.

"Whatever we are or hope to be, there is one coat that fits us," averred Emmy. "It's the coat of comradeship, and it was made to order for the Equitable Eight."

"Long may they wave!" exclaimed Ruth. "Everybody, all together now—three cheers for the Equitable Eight."

The fervent huzzas brought Miss Wyndham to the veranda. She had purposely left the girls to themselves on this last evening. As a chaperon she deserved to be decorated.

Her appearance was the signal for a fresh three cheers, given in honor of the "best comrade in the world," as Ruth prettily put it.

After bowing her acknowledgments, she said,

"I hate to be a kill-joy, but it's after ten o'clock, my dears. You ought to go to bed if you expect to catch those early trains I have heard frequent mention of in the last twenty-four hours."

"One more song and we'll subside." Betty picked up the idle mandolin and strummed lightly a few bars of the song she had been saving. "All ready," she said, smiling her affection at her companions.

Upon the still air the tender strains of that plaintive heart throb,

"Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And never brought to mind"

filled the night with lingering sweetness. The singers put untold meaning into the old song that is warranted never to die as long as earth holds a spot where friends may gather in the name of fellowship.

"For Auld Lang Syne," murmured Ruth softly, as the vocal plea for eternal friendship ended in a faint echo which the night wind carried to the sentinel mountains.

And that was the watchword which the Equitable Eight took to their hearts to cherish as they climbed the stairs for their last night's sleep under the hospitable canopy of Wanderer's Roost.

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